

2 Advent C

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

The text for the sermon is from our Second Lesson:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

If you remember last week's sermon, I tipped my hand a little bit about my feelings about John the Baptizer. Up until last year, I've just never really liked the guy. He's just a little too weird for my taste, what with the camel skin loincloth and the diet of wild honey and locusts. He's just a little too macrobiotic for me. Too low in cholesterol.

And then there's his confrontational style. He's also a little too Donald Trump for me. I just think it's rude to call somebody a “brood of vipers,” don't you? Or to threaten them with unquenchable fire? That's really rude. I mean, my mother taught me that you catch more flies with honey. But John the Baptist, never having had the benefit of my mother's teaching, goes about calling decent people awful names and telling them that if they don't bear good fruit and soon, their collective goose is cooked.

When we think of the gospel message—the word “gospel” meaning good news, after all—it's not John the Baptist's harsh carping that we think of, is it? He's basically pointing his finger and telling people go around being do-gooders woe to them if they don't do the things he says.

Let's face it, we don't like it when people tell us what to do and what not to do. Remember the uproar when Mayor Bloomberg tried to put a ban on bucket-sized vats of soda? And before that the controversies about whether or not to ban smoking in public places or require the wearing of seatbelts. (Oh, how my mother hated that! She always swore they wrinkled her clothing.) And of course, we face yet again the question of whether there should be meaningful gun control legislation in the wake of yet another in a long, long string of mass shootings. Particularly as Americans, we covet our freedoms, though sometimes I think that it at odds with what it means to be Christian.

But let's go back to John the Baptist for a minute and let me tell you how I came to have a change of heart about him. I was in Florence just over a year ago. Florence is a beautiful city, but it is over-run by tourists and commerce and merchandise. I heard more American English in the Piazza della Signoria than I do when I'm in mid-town Manhattan. But over across the river Arno, in a less hectic part of the city I happened upon a modern bronze statue of John the Baptist. It's an incredibly odd statue, made by Guiliano Vanghi and given to Florence in 1996. Like the actual John the Baptist, this John is not lovely at all. His face is strained; his body is gaunt, almost emaciated. He stands with his right arm raised, pointing his finger, as if in alarm at the actions of the people. His rough-hewn cloak is lined with camel hair; his bare feet, long matted hair and beard recall his days in the desert. He's a pitiful sight. And for the first time in

my life, looking at this statue, I felt deeply for the work John was called to do. He was not called to be the messiah, the savior of the people. He was called to remind them of their sinfulness, in order that they may more keenly than ever realize that they needed a savior. He had a hard job, telling people they were broken, telling them they needed a savior and that he wasn't it.

Well--we need a savior. Because we live in a world of sin. That's the church word for it, but the world knows what it means. Sin is what makes us ashamed of ourselves and not just as individuals, because really individual sins aren't generally such a big deal. It's the big stuff that gets to us. Sin is when we can't clean up the mess we've made of the earth. Sin is when we can't—or won't—work to stop the killing and warring of humans with one another and so, as the least worst choice, have to perpetuate war. Sin is when our legal and social systems fail us. Sin is when our economic systems benefit some at the expense and welfare of many who have too little. Sin is when we know we hold some of our deepest bonds together—marriages, families—with a combination of Scotch tape and here's hoping.

And we know who the sinners are. We can't draw a line between us and them. Because we aren't only saints. And they aren't only sinners. It's not just the fault of the Muslims or the extremists or the conservatives or the liberals or the women or the minorities or the upper middle class white men in their fifties. We, the Americans or we, the educated, or we the Christians, are not exempt from sin and therefore from blame. We are a bit, I fear--just as John the Baptist said--a brood of vipers seeking to flee the wrath to come. We'd very much like to flee the consequences of humanity's collective actions and sins.

But—but just as I find myself very uncharacteristically calling us a brood of vipers, I remember that I've got something much, much better to say to you. Listen:

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;

shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,

he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;

you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

as on a day of festival.

Rejoicing, as on a day of festival, will replace the judgments that God has made against you, O Daughter Zion. O Daughter Jerusalem, exult and sing with all your heart because the Lord is in your midst to renew you in love.

But what does all this mean? What is the connection between the hard and necessary words of John the Baptist and these words of joy and excess from Zephaniah? Reading these words you might think that all was laughter and joy for the people to whom Zephaniah was sent to prophecy. But no, not at all!

Zephaniah was prophesying to a people who had grown weary and complacent—priests allowing the worship of other gods, officials pandering to foreign tastes and the rich neglecting the poor who grow poorer. And so he was announcing the wholesale destruction that God was ordaining. It was to be the Day of the Lord, a day of wrath, a time of the complete destruction of creation, an act of divine retribution to upend and undo the stories of creation we find in Genesis. This day of wrath would not favor the children of Abraham because, indeed, it was the children of Abraham who were responsible for the corruption of their covenant with God; they were under the judgment of God and they would not survive. Woe, woe unto you, O Zion, on that day!

Zephaniah, like John the Baptist, came announcing the wrath to come.

But, wait! What about all that singing and exulting that comes at the end of the book of Zephaniah? What about the promise of renewed relationship with God? What happened? Did the people finally shape up? Did they earn their reward? Had they satisfied God's requirements?

What we discover is that no, they didn't. It wasn't a series of New Year's resolutions, well-kept, that caused the Lord to enter into their midst and declare them participants at the party of a life time. It wasn't the good will of the people at all, but God's own choosing, God's own willing that averts the disaster. Evil was forestalled. And the certain judgment that would break in upon the people was taken away from them by God's own gracious, mysterious and loving willing.

Listen once again: The LORD has taken away the judgements against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst...

Perhaps it really is the same for us. Maybe, too often, too much, we are like that frightful brood of vipers.

I know I have my dark moods, my viperish days. I have days when I am ashamed of myself for all I haven't said to those I love and for all that I have said that I should have not. I have days of shame for my country, of which I consider myself a loyal and participating citizen. I have days of shame for aspects of Christianity, the faith tradition in which I have served with heart and soul my entire adult life. I have days when I know

that we, as Christians and we as humans fall pitifully short and are more than a little content to be self-serving and judgmental of others. And at these times, these not infrequent times, I am ashamed for us.

But—and this is the *gospel* promise!--God takes our shame from us. God takes our shame and sets us dancing. God sets us singing. God reaches into our hearts are at their bleakest, most shameful and God lifts us up to renew us in love.

God waits upon us to rouse us from our slumber of shame.

Isn't that what all our Advent preparations mean? We could spend all our time worrying and fretting because John the Baptist was right: we are sinners, vipers, fallen ones, individually and collectively trying to flee the wrath to come.

But week by week, as we approach Christmas, Jesus comes ever nearer to crowning into our lives. We must awaken from the slumber of shame and sin. We must shake off our sleepiness in preparation for this birth. For this new life in the baby Jesus is *our* new life *in* Jesus. With this birth comes the power to bear those fruits which John the Baptist calls us to bear—and not out of obligation and shame, but out of the freedom God gives to us. Because of Jesus, we live as loving kin to one another, you and I, and kin to all those who are in need. Because of Jesus' coming birth, we can dance and sing and exult, as on the day of a festival.

So—close your eyes for just a moment. Close your eyes and let your mind wander until in your imagination, you are at a party, a veritable festival.

It is a party at which the Lord is singing to you in a loud and happy voice. The Lord is singing to you a love song. And you are dancing, dancing tirelessly. Your legs are strong and supple. You are breathless with laughter. You spin around in a circle and the bright colors of the other dancers are a brilliant blur.

In your arms there is a baby. The baby who is God. The baby laughs and giggles in joy at your dance. And when you pause for just a moment, to catch your breath, the baby's hand reaches out to stroke your face, your mouth. The baby's and—God's hand!—reaches as if to touch the words of praise that are already forming on your lips.

Emmanuel, we say: The Lord is in our midst. Sing aloud, O loved ones! Rejoice and sing.

Hark, the glad sound! The savior comes, the savior promised long; Let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song!

Amen.