

It is with great joy that we light the third, rose candle, of our Advent wreath this weekend. Someone told me recently why there are three blue candles and one pink one—just in case it was a girl! Some think in fact that the rose candle is for Mary, but the truth is that this third candle has nothing at all to do with gender. The word for this day is “rejoice:” and it is with this sense of gladness and thanksgiving that we light the rose candle. Even in the midst of our expectant waiting we focus on the joy that is already ours in Jesus Christ.

Zephaniah begins, a soloist crying out in the wilderness:

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

And then Isaiah joins in, as we heard in today’s canticle, the “First Song of Isaiah:”

...therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation...

And then St. Paul directs the entire congregation in Philippi to join in the chorus for this day—whether or not they think they can sing:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

But it doesn’t stop there. The song echoes through the centuries. In the ninth century, the great Latin text that is at the heart of Advent was written:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear:
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

And then in the early part of the eighteenth century:

Rejoice! Rejoice, believers and let your lights appear...

And so that very same song echoes down to us—to this time and place where we are invited to add our own harmonies. *Rejoice!*

We need to distinguish, though, between happiness (which is almost an idol in our culture) and joy. Happiness tends to be defined by externals: it’s a warm puppy or new leather upholstery in our car. Joy goes deeper. Paul is writing from a prison cell to the Church in Philippi. Here and elsewhere in his writings he’s able to find joy even in the midst of suffering. You can be certain it isn’t warm and cozy in his prison cell. But he knows Christ is in that prison cell with him and therefore he can still rejoice. He can still *enjoy* the presence of God even in times of trouble. So, too, I think with us. December carries with it a lot of old stuff including no small amount of unresolved grief. Add to that the frenetic pace and we can easily feel out of control. But how do we find Christ even here—even now—in the midst of all of that? If the One we prepare for truly is “God-with-us” then that has to be not only when all is calm and bright but even when life is a mess too.

The question of the day, however, is this: who invited John the Baptist to this party? I mean, we left him last week at the Jordan River, crying out in the wilderness and preparing the way. That's fine. That's his job. But now the third candle is lit and he is calling people snakes. How is his message possibly "good news?" How does it help us to rejoice?

The thing is, his words can ring in our ears as a bit too much "fire and brimstone." Now I know that there are some people who say they *like* "fire and brimstone" preaching. Or so I've been told, on occasion by someone who isn't all that crazy about *my* preaching. The thing I've observed, though, is that most "fire and brimstone" preaching is really a spectator sport. Very few preachers actually go after the people in the pews with them—inside the church building. Usually it's about finding a scapegoat who can be caricatured who is not in the room to defend herself. Those "godless" ones are attacked as the congregation gets all riled up and shouts "amen/ Praise the Lord!" Other people, not the hearers, are being scolded.

But of course we owe it to John the Baptist to notice that is clearly not what he is doing. He's the real deal—like the prophets of old. He is challenging his *hearers*, not some group upon whom he has projected his rage. "Who warned *you*?" he shouts! John is about repentance—about changing one's ways—about turning around—about getting right with God. He tells his hearers, "don't *you* count on Abraham to save you." God has no grandchildren. By that I mean that you can teach your children and your children's children the stories of the faith and bring them to church—but there comes a point when they must own it for themselves, or not. Each of us must ask: how will we live our lives—these lives God has given to us? And no one else can do that for us. John is telling his hearers that they can't rely on the tradition or the faith of their ancestors to save them. They need to own it and claim it as their own. Or not.

Like all the prophets, John is a truth-teller. His words ring true and that, I think, is why people respond to him. Because most of us know when we are being smooth-talked or placated. You can disagree with John but you have to respect him because he lays it on the line. And in fact, people respond: "what can we do? What *should* we do?" John's response is simple: "share your stuff." And then the tax-collectors want to know if there is anything more? "Don't cheat," John tells him. And the soldiers ask him. "Don't lord it over others," he responds.

Repent. Share your stuff. Don't cheat. Don't misuse your power. That is John's Advent message—part two. It's what preparing the way and making the paths straight is all about. He insists that being faithful isn't confined to some spiritual realm but is lived out in the real world, in the midst of our lives and our work in the world. His words linger in the air—especially in a culture that has argued that "greed is good."

Maybe Charles Dickens' can help us to see just what John the Baptist is up to today. I think Dickens got it right when he had Scrooge wake up to the meaning of Christmas to finally realize that the goal isn't "whoever has the most toys when he dies wins." As he comes to learn, life finds its meaning when we share our stuff and stop taking advantage of others just because we can. The scriptures say that God rejoices whenever one sinner repents and we experience that, I think, every time we watch "A Christmas Carol." *Repent. Share your stuff. Don't cheat. Don't abuse your authority.*

There really is good news in this gospel reading, and cause for rejoicing: because it is about new life and new possibilities and the healing that leads to transformation. John's ultimate concern is not to try to scare the hell out of people, but to call us back into our skin: back to the God who has created us in love. The fact of the matter is, to the hard of hearing you must sometimes shout. His version of "fire and brimstone," however, is rooted in the love of God that is made manifest when we love our neighbor. Lives lived in such a way do bear fruit worthy of repentance.

In the end, John the Baptist is no skunk at the picnic. His hard words may well provide a counter-melody but they remain part and parcel of the same song we have gathered here to sing today—they lead us into the presence of God and in the presence of God there is joy.

"Rejoice! Again I say, rejoice!"