



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 3 Year C

What Should We Do?

[RCL]: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, traditionally called Gaudete - or Rejoice - Sunday. It comes from today's lesson from the Letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

In the other two lessons, the prophet Zephaniah also calls for shouts of joy: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" It is because the King of Israel is in her midst. The prophet Isaiah also tells people to rejoice and sing the praises of the Lord, "for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel."

Advent is a season of waiting, expectation, and preparation for the coming of the Lord. We know that Jesus the Christ will be born very soon. We certainly need to rejoice.

However, in the Gospel reading, there comes the straight-talking prophet, John the Baptist. He is yelling at those who came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers!" It does not sound like he is rejoicing, though. What has caused John to call others vipers?

After this outburst, John continues his theme of repentance. He tells the crowd not to take for granted their status as children of Abraham as a guarantee of salvation. He tells them they need to bear fruits from repentance. He warns them that an ax is waiting by the roots of the tree, should no fruit be borne. It is not who they are or who their ancestor was, it is what they *do* that is most important.

One might have thought that those who came and were yelled at would turn around and leave. Nevertheless, they did not leave John. John may sound harsh to us, but people probably felt his sincerity, his telling the truth with love, and his concern for the people.

There is a joke that people like to go to Episcopal churches because there is absolution of sins every Sunday. They say that people can do whatever they like and sin during the weekdays and be absolved every Sunday. Is that what confession and absolution are about? Only doing lip service? It is probably these

kinds of people that caused John to call them a brood of vipers. In the confession, people say, “We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.”

We are truly sorry and humbly repent. This is a confession from the heart. It is not lip service; it is not just showing up and reciting the Confession of Sin.

These people not only do not leave, but rather they stay and ask John for an alternative: “What then should we do?” — a true wish to repent, to get into action so as to turn from their old ways of life. John the Baptist knows the Messiah is coming soon. He feels the urgency, he wants people to be prepared and to bear fruit. He gives them advice.

John’s advice to the crowd is much easier than Jesus’. John tells people to share what they have—an easier task than when Jesus tells the young man to sell all he owns. John says if they have two coats, share. If they have food, share. In other words, care for others who have less than they do.

Then come the tax collectors. They too ask, “What should we do?” At that time, the tax collectors were mostly Jews hired by the Romans; these collectors were paid a portion of whatever they collected, so they tended to collect more than was required from the people. John tells them to be fair and not to collect more than they should.

Here comes the third group, the soldiers, probably Roman. They ask the same: “What should we do?” This time, John tells them not to exploit people or make false accusations. That is, they should live with integrity and honor.

This passage shows the diversity of the group. The crowd seems to represent the Jews who have enough; the tax collectors, the outcasts; and the soldiers, the gentiles. They all seek to change their lives. Even though John is harsh in the beginning, he gives advice to them all. John’s advice is not dramatic, he just asks them to turn from what they are doing their *own* way, and instead to start doing things the *right* way—*God’s* way.

The people want to change and are waiting for their Messiah to come. With John’s urgent teaching, they suspect him to be that Messiah, but he knows his call is to clear the way for the real one to come. John is to introduce the coming of Jesus, guiding people to see God’s way. He tells the people that the Messiah, the Christ, is coming with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus the Christ will come with the power and great might of God to be among us. The great fire is to cleanse us from our wrongdoings.

John the Baptist is teaching us to care for those in need, to seek justice, and to have integrity. Actually, those are part of what following Jesus the Christ is about. With true repentance to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, rejoice!

John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, a place where one may get lost, a barren place that seems to have no life or hope. Wilderness is a good metaphor for us right now. We are in a world bombarded by media, especially social media. We are certainly bewildered by news and fake news, truth and alternate truth. There seems to be no peace in the world. Natural disasters seem to be occurring more often than usual. Hope seems to be dwindling in the world.

We Christians need to ask a question: “What should we do?”

We should carry the prophetic voice of John the Baptist, calling out to the brood of vipers for true repentance. We should change our way of life. The gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” is increasing in society; are we willing to share with those with less? Or are we to continue taking more from others who are already struggling to fill their pockets? Are we to continue to benefit ourselves? Are we to elevate our status at the expense of hurting others? Are we to offer false accusations by telling half-truths or even totally lying? Are we willing to call out ourselves and those who do these things?

John the Baptist has given us the direction to be prepared for the coming of Christ. Are we willing to turn around? Are we courageous enough to hear and heed his prophetic voice?

The third Sunday of Advent is also called Stir-Up Sunday because today’s collect says, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.” May God the Almighty with the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit also stir up our hearts to truly repent and to follow Christ. Amen.

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