

Advent III, December 16, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Zephaniah 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

That first reading from Zephaniah – it's tremendously powerful! Read it out loud and it sounds like the climax of a great sermon, doesn't it?!! Think of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I have a dream" speech on the Mall in Washington D.C.

*"I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.....I will bring you home....."*

Paul, writing to the Philippians, seems to be responding to that vision, that hope, that dream for the future in the only appropriate way: he calls for rejoicing!

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

Rejoice and give thanks, for Jesus – God's peace – will protect you, is already protecting you.

Here we are, in the Third Week of Advent, already celebrating the joy of relationship with God, each other, and the wonder of creation. Those are good things to take away with you when you leave today!

At the same time, this is not an "Immediate Gratification Sunday!" No skipping lightly into the presence of a bouncy baby, as much as we might feel the need to go there now.

An Advent response would be to remember that our ten-days-hence encounter with God isn't once-for-all, it's ongoing right now and into the future. Life will go on after December 25, and we'll be a part of that going-on. At this time that's an especially important reminder, because it's so easy to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the secular "holiday season" – or, for that matter, to see too much 'Christmas' in Advent, while forgetting that Advent is different than Christmas, is about a broader preparation that invites a change that's longer lasting than for just a few days around the darkest time of the year.

Perhaps that's why we get John the Baptist today! The contrast between the tone of the first two readings and the gospel reading acts as the sort of reminder I've just described. John's opening remarks don't exactly fall into the category of a "bouncy baby" moment! "Brood of Vipers" is a pretty harsh moniker! He could find a place for that one along side the insulting tirades of certain contemporary politicians!

But then, I suppose I have to ask myself – and all of you – "What did you expect John would say to those who he believed didn't "get" what he was saying, who seemed to think that performing mechanical actions without any genuine ethical intent was okay?!! John's vitriolic language is challenging, because it seems so out of place in a gospel about Jesus who is the loving face of

God. So let's not spend any more time on it, because it's not the substance of what he was trying to say, it's only a reflection of a larger "in your face" approach that *was* getting through to the people. Getting through 'Bigly.' We know that, because all sorts and conditions of folk were showing up asking him "What should we do?" In response to these earnest queries, what do you think John should suggest?

Should he tell them to go become hermits, like him? Should he tell them to go found a political movement ("The Messiah Party" maybe?!) to try and make a difference in a world where politics was only for the wealthy and powerful? Should he tell these ordinary working people – carpenters, bakers, tax collectors – to go and establish some huge social service agency to reach out to lepers and beggars and others who were the marginalized people in the culture of his day?

For us today, those possibilities could have some merit. No one should want to knock the meditative life, or those who try to do good for society through government, or those who reach out to the poor; and there are plenty of genuine people trying to do just that in our world, right now.

Mostly, though, John recommended no such grand things or practices. When they asked about the huge changes John had preached about, and what it meant for their ordinary, everyday lives, he sent every person who came to him back to their regular life, ordinary activities, ***but as changed people.*** Essentially he told each of them: "*Do what you've been doing but do it better, do it more honestly, do it as an act of service for others.*" Share what you have, John said. Be honest and above board in your work. Be faithful to whatever task is yours to perform in life. Live just and ethical lives for others.

My takeaway is that John was saying "Don't think you're going to change the world on your own, but if you're willing to try and grow into this new way of living then together we will be a part of that grander work of cosmic renewal that the One Who Is Coming will inaugurate."

It's easy, I think, to see our ordinary, everyday lives as just that: ordinary. I mean the lives we live on south Whidbey, that include grocery stores and getting gas, meals at the dinner table, or coffee with friends – ones that include all of those many places where we gather and encounter others. The Baptist's advice to those who may ask him for advice is to say "no life is ordinary!" Or perhaps "not ordinary any longer!"

Active repentance, according to John, looks like small changes, baby steps. Learn to walk first, before you try to run, he said, but ***do*** do those things – do make those small changes, do take those baby steps; bigger ones will follow. And see those small changes, baby steps for what they are, as profoundly spiritual and profoundly important.

For me that recognition is a sharp reminder that while we rightly claim we are about to reach a special and singular moment, a special time of the year in the Christmas celebration, it's not so very special at all unless it has a profound effect on all the ordinary, non-special moments of our lives as well – unless we become John's changed people, because John's changed people are Jesus' changed people.