

Advent 3, December 13, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Wow! There has to be a potent 'back-story' here! I mean, can you imagine someone showing up in church to be baptized only to be greeted with the accusation that they're part of a "brood of vipers?!" If I went to a church like that I'd do an about-face and head for the exit! And if I'd have lived in 1st Century Palestine in the time of John the Baptist I can't see myself having a warm and fuzzy feeling about him - despite his fuzzy clothes! Outrageous 'hell-and-damnation' language, no gentle correctives here.

As I read this story I wouldn't have been alone in being more than a little scared by John, though my guess is that the "brood" accusation wasn't leveled at everyone, only those who - in John's view, anyway - were only superficially committed to the repentance that his baptism demanded.

Nevertheless, I'm thinking that everyone who went to John did so with some level of fear and trepidation. Luke's chosen symbol for us was tax collectors, but I suspect their question was everyone's question: "we get the danger in front of us," they might have said, and then did say what sounds like the complimentary part of that unspoken statement: "what....should we do?"

That doesn't sound like a joyful question; it sounds like a question born of doubt and anxiety: what, in the faces of all of life's crosses, small and large, should we do?

And there's a connected question: even if we can do something, would it make a difference? For us today that's certainly a lively question: in the face of terrorism, war, street violence, rogue cops, climate change, is there *anything* we can do? Is there any hope *at all* for us?

John's answers to this set of questions is to point to ethical behavior as the doorway that can usher us toward living into the compassion, righteousness and generosity of God in our lives.

Still, the answer to those questions – is there anything we can do, is there any hope at all for us? – is still "no" – not, at least, if we think in individual terms, just about our own personal behavior. It has to be seen in terms of community.

John the Baptist is, for us, the herald of a new community – he says as much at the end of today's gospel reading. That new community is, for us, inaugurated with a birth.

That new community is predicated on one of the Baptist's favorite words: repentance. That's a word replete with meaning, and we don't always embrace the central one. We tend to think of repentance as meaning "feeling bad about our behavior" – which tends get tied to feeling bad about ourselves.

The way I actually grasped the meaning of that word – 'repentance' was when I was with a group hiking on the Yorkshire moors. The moors are notorious for quick changes in weather, and around 11:00 a.m. - when we were well out from our starting point - fog descended on us. No one had a compass! So for awhile we wandered around a little aimlessly until, after about an

hour, the fog lifted. It lifted, and we found we'd been heading away from our destination! A quick reorientation and we were on our way.

Repentance means reorienting – figuring out where we should be headed, where we want to be headed, then changing those things that prevent us from doing so. That could mean reorienting priorities, reorienting behavior, reorienting relationships – changing direction.

That's John's call to all of us, not only as individuals but also as a community.

The turning of the year is a time when we tend to try that almost automatically – it's what "New Year's Resolutions" are all about! A good friend and colleague in Indiana – Greg – used to hate New Years' Resolutions! He was a workout fanatic (actually I envy his dedication to staying fit!). For 11 months of the year he had the local "Y" for himself and a few others. But after January 1st - well - all those folk who had made a "New Year's Resolution" to lose weight, get fit, showed up at the "Y." The good news for him was that most of them lasted about two weeks, then it was back to normal!

Studies have shown that it actually takes about 21 days to create a habit! Apparently, though, few of us are able to maintain habit-creating behavior for 21 days!

John's call to repentance is to modify our behavior for more than 21 days – his vision is of a permanent change, a reorientation of our life's priorities toward the things of God, that speak of living into the compassion, righteousness and generosity of God in our lives.

The result of that change is what Zephaniah talks of: a time when those who are outcast and lame, those who have suffered from the vagaries of life will find everything transformed, and sorrow will be replaced with joy, fear replaced with hope, death replaced with life.

It's to that vision that Paul invites us, one that through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving calls forth from us the practices of rejoicing and gentleness.

Advent directs us toward that vision, invites in us that behavior, encourages in us that change.

May it be so for us. Amen.