

Third Sunday of Advent-Year C- The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony-12.12.21
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Canticle 9, Philippians 4: 4-7, Luke 3: 7-18

This Sunday's Collect prays "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us;". It has been known for many years as "stir up" Sunday. Certainly the words attributed to John the Baptist were designed to "stir up" the people gathered on the banks of the Jordan River. "You brood of vipers" hardly the way to begin a sermon, although it does get one's attention.

John the Baptist was a messenger of God, in a long line of messengers stretching far back to Abraham and Sarah, the patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish people. God's message was one of blessing to these two and to all of their decedents. It was a message of foundation for the human community. It was a message of responsibility and re-creation of the human family. Abraham and Sarah were among the first messengers but they would not be the last. Human beings would heed God's message of salvation for a time, change their behavior and then slide back into sin. Centuries later, the people who would become the Jews were taken into exile in Egypt. After a time another messenger, Moses came to lead them out of that place and into the land of God's promise. A land of prosperity and plenty, of sharing and peace.

Then again, the vipers in the form of human sin caused the people to be defeated by ones more powerful than they. Jerusalem was destroyed and the people yet again sent into exile this time in Babylon. Again messengers came, in the voices of the prophets and after a time the Jews were allowed to return and rebuild their city, their Temple, and their relationship with God. But the Jews were unable to continue in peace and prosperity because outside of themselves and their community larger and more powerful forces were at work. Rome came to bring invasion and occupation. This was a new form of exile, an estrangement from the promises of God within the land. No longer were the people sent physically away, but the temple was corrupted and the worship of God compromised to conform to the worldly demands of Rome. God sent a new messenger, John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Messiah to come. Those who came to the banks of the Jordan to hear John, were people who were disheartened, discouraged, unable to see where God was leading them. They sought to listen to the voice of the messenger as their ancestors had done many times before.

John's message, delivered in harsh terms was nevertheless one of hope. It was one that clearly spoke of the promise of God being for all people. All are in God's eyes children of Abraham. This was a message of inclusion and promise for everyone and for all creation. John was calling those who came to be baptized by him to special responsibility and action. It was a call that began with repentance. The invitation to repentance was not for one time only but was a recognition that as human beings in this life, we often go astray and often need to repent and return.

Having heard the first part of John's message, the people rightly asked what they should do. It is the question that had been asked and answered over centuries asked and answered with the commandments given through Moses, with the words of the prophets, with the covenants. It

is the question asked of the apostles and elders and answered by them. The question is asked and answered down to our own day each time we renew our baptismal vows. What shall we do? The answer may take many forms but is at its heart the same. Repent, listen for the voice of God and live according to God's word.

That day on the banks of the Jordan River the question asked by the people gathered there was a question of what action to take. John, that day had an answer specific to who had come. The largest group gathered were people like us, people who have sought to follow God like us, a group of great diversity. John's answer to the crowd that day is the same answer that we hear today. Recognize that power is a force to be used for good or ill. Use it for good. We all have power, the power to share what we have rather than simply accumulate more. The power to act one situation and person at a time to make the world a better place. The power to challenge the powerful on behalf of the powerless when the opportunity arises.

A second group on the banks of the Jordan were the tax collectors. Few people like to pay taxes, though we recognize the need to do so. The tax collectors of John the Baptist's time were in collusion with Rome. The system was corrupt. The tax collectors could exact whatever they could, paying the Romans a set amount, and keeping what was left for themselves. John, in words that ring true today directed that they be honest in the little things as well as the big, that they practice integrity and fairness in their business dealings. That, in the words of a Peruvian proverb, that they live within their harvest.

Finally the soldiers, asked John what they should do. His answer was straightforward and challenging. In the face of temptation to pressure those weaker than themselves. They were instructed to use the power of might to defend others and to protect those who were vulnerable.

John answered the question for what to do, pretty much for everyone on Jordan's banks that day. He answered it for pretty much everyone we know, pretty much for each of us as well. Live according to the promise of God and be the messenger who brings that promise into the lives of those around you.

One more story: "A father and his son, traveling together in a wagon, came to the edge of a forest. Some bushes, thick with berries, caught the child's eye. 'Father, 'he asked, 'may we stop awhile so that I can pick some berries?"

The father was anxious to complete his journey, but he did not have it in his heart to refuse the boy's request. The wagon was called to a halt, and the son alighted to pick the berries. After a while, the father wanted to continue on his way. But his son had become so engrossed with berry-picking that he could not bring himself to leave the forest. 'Son!', cried the father, 'We cannot stay here all day! We must continue our journey.'

Even the father's pleas were not enough to lure the boy away. What could the father do? Surely he loved his son no less for acting so childishly. He would not think of leaving him behind—but he really did have to get going on his journey.

Finally he called out: 'You may pick your berries for a while longer, but be sure you are still able to find me, for I shall start moving slowly along the road. As you work, call out 'Father! Father!' every few minutes, and I shall answer you. As long as you can hear my voice, know that I am still nearby. But as soon as you can no longer hear my answer, know that you are lost, and run with all your strength to find me!'

The people to whom John spoke knew that they no longer heard the voice of God. They were afraid and sought the answer to the question of what to do. John's answer, God's answer is simple, run with all your strength to hear the voice of God calling out to you.