

REJOICE!
The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452
www.aidanvbva.net
Advent 3 2018

This is the third Sunday in Advent and the theme is joy. Often called Gaudete Sunday, which translates to rejoice, which is why we have a theme of joy. So then we have Luke who presents us with John the Baptist calling the leaders of the temple a brood of vipers. OK so the theme and the gospel do not exactly match up however the rest of the readings give us reason to celebrate and rejoice. And when you think about it, the gospel does as well.

First we need to begin with the Canticle, one of my favorites, the First Song of Isaiah. "Surely it is God who saves me; trusting him I shall not fear. For the Lord defends and shields us and his saving help is near." That is how the hymn setting of the First Song of Isaiah our canticle for today begins. I have found myself singing that in my head all week long. Why? It is a healthy response to the news of the day. The ugliness we see today is all based on fear and that goes for all sides in this dark and ugly world as we approach the birth of Jesus once again. This is a hymn of praise that joyfully lists how God saved the Jewish people and this dates from 2400 years ago. This is the first of the Isaiah canticles that are about the end of the Babylonian Captivity and the approaching return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city; certainly a reason to rejoice.

The passage from Zephaniah is also a hymn of praise in many respects. This ancient prophet calls on Israel to "rejoice and exult with all your hearts." We are told that we have nothing to fear for God is with us. There is the promise to save the lame, gather the outcast and change shame into praise. There is a promise to restore our fortunes. This too is certainly a promise worth celebrating.

Then we have the Philippians passage which begins with "Rejoice in the Lord always again and I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything..." All of these messages are worth rejoicing over. There is however a clue in this last passage that gives us a hint as to how our gospel passage is a reason to rejoice.

That is the statement about let your gentleness be known to everyone. There is also the promise of the peace of God, which passes all understanding that I mentioned last week. The message is last week's sermon, by giving the peace we have we receive the peace that God offers.

John the Baptist spoke of preparing the way, making the way straight, the mountains low and filling in the valleys. All of a sudden this week in the second half of the story he turns on the people who have come to be baptized and calls them a brood of vipers.

Now in the Matthew version of this scene, John is talking specifically to the Pharisees, but in Luke after chastising the leaders he turns to the crowds. Now what is that all about?

He is calling on everyone to follow the teachings of the prophets. Jesus did not invent his call to care for and love our neighbors. When he gives the great commandment he is quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The teachings about caring for each other are all through the Hebrew Scriptures especially in the prophets. The prophets always called on those with in power to care for those on the margins.

The key in John's teaching is the statement about the ax that is lying at the root of the tree. He tells them to bear good fruit. Eugene Peterson translates the passage like this, "What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."

What John is saying to the crowds is act, live like you actually have read the prophets and the commandments. I found myself remembering a favorite quote of Gandhi. When asked his thoughts on Christianity he said something to the effect of "Your Jesus I like, his followers not so much." To put it a little more bluntly I saw a T-shirt the other day that says. "I love Jesus it's his fan club I can't stand." In other words live the gospel in all ways. Show it by action as well as your words.

The call from John is to be a faithful follower of what God has already commanded long before Jesus or John the Baptist walked the earth! It is a call to bear fruit worthy of the gospel.

John addresses the general population with a message not to be greedy, to share, in other words to act as the prophets of old taught. He is questioned by several specific groups and he gives them specific things to do. However, It comes down to take care of the poor, the widow the orphan and above all treat each other as you want to be treated. This is the message John is proclaiming and he is proclaiming it to us today as well. Even more important he is saying that is not just doing these actions because they are the righteous thing to do, but to become righteous we must be transformed. Our hearts, must be changed.

Peterson translates what will happen when Jesus comes this way, " (He) will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out." This type of transformation is not just about changing your mind, but about being transformed by the Holy Spirit. This is the change of heart that Jesus brings to the baptism of John. The Spirit is what makes this all different.

The question that the people ask and that we should ask is, "What should we do?" Last week I talked about taking time to pray to meditate to help achieve peace. So here is a slightly different suggestion. Take a moment this week and re-read this gospel. Then use your imagination to take you to that spot by the Jordan River among the many people. You hear his message and then you walk up to John and ask him, "What should

I do?" Then wait and see what answer is provided. Take some time this week to sit with that question and see what the Spirit lights inside of you.

In testing the answer look to the measuring rod that John gives us. "What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire." In other words, what are the fruits of your actions, your thoughts, your heart. Do they provide fruit that you are proud to show to Jesus? What is the chaff, the useless husk that is not needed, that does not bring the kingdom closer. In fact the chaff is what gets in the way of the kingdom.

Advent is a season of preparation and here is another way to help prepare. However today's message is one of rejoice. Rejoice for the answers to how do to be transformed into the people God is calling us to be is right in front of us and much of it comes from the mouth of John the Baptist this week. And again I say REJOICE!