

### Advent 3C: Judgment: An invitation to Joy?

The gift we celebrate today around the Advent wreath is JOY. On the Advent wreath its color makes it stand out as very different from the other candles which surround the Christ Candle. The epistle lectionary passage from Philippians is a call to this gift of joy, joy that is based in the nearness of the Lord; joy that we can go to the Lord with our prayers and supplications; that we go with thanksgiving for the hope and peace the Lord's nearness brings. Joy and rejoicing are refrains that we like to hear. I like all the passages from Psalms and other places in scripture which call me to experience joy. One of my pastimes is found in the love of reading. In some senses I am eclectic in the genres I read. I am not so fond of watching movies or serial television programming but when I do watch them, there are certain characteristics common between those I like and the books I like. Whatever form the stories take, I like it to have happy endings. Surely celebrating that the Lord is near anticipates a happy ending. Reading that Philippian passage it might seem that our preparation for Christ's advent into our world might be turning to celebration and away from the anticipation of judgment. But the readings from the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel of Luke are not quite that simple. Although joy is mentioned and given as an option for the people, these readings are not all about joy. In her reflections on the passages for this Sunday, Jill Duffield editor of Outlook summed it up this way in the title she used: Rejoice, you brood of vipers. The call to rejoice is clearly in tension with the message of coming judgment. And the theme of judgment cannot be overlooked. Our Hebrew scripture begins with Zephaniah 3:14. It calls for the people to rejoice and exult with all their hearts because the Lord has taken away the judgments against them. We understand that as a statement about God's grace even though we don't frequently associate grace with Old Testament writings. The prophet Zephaniah lived in about the same time period as Isaiah. It was a time when God was displeased with the way the people were living. Zephaniah is only three chapters long and this verse occurs near the end of the third chapter. The majority of Zephaniah's message has been proclaiming God's judgment against the people and all the surrounding nations. Zephaniah calls them out for their actions. Zephaniah's word from God begins with this statement "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth." The verses are very explicit that everything is indeed all inclusive. The images which follow are of catastrophic happenings. The punishments are against the priests, the kings and princes, rulers who have allowed idolatry and have profaned worship and done violence to God's laws. These pronouncements of total destruction seem to have no correlation to the call to rejoice and exult found in today's text. After continually speaking to the people about God's judgment which was coming because of their disobedience; seeing the reality that neighboring kingdoms were about to overrun them; how could Zephaniah speak of joy coming for the people? Did this ending mean that Zephaniah suddenly saw the world through rose colored glasses where nothing bad happened? There is no indication that the people have changed. Yet in chapter 3: verse 11 a change in the message begins to emerge which will result in an announcement of forgiveness and call to rejoice. Verse 11 reads "On that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. Removal and change in them are described as the future for the people. Those changed will then be a different people. Verse 12: "For I will leave in the midst of you a people

humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord—they shall do no wrong, and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths.” Through Zephaniah, the Lord is stating that a time will come when there will be conversion to a new way of life, a different way of interacting with both God and their fellowman. Because Zephaniah saw a future with people reformed by God’s action, he gave the call to rejoice. Now fast forward to the time of Jesus and John the Baptist. We considered last week how John was fulfilling the role of preparing the way of the Lord. Luke identifies him as the voice crying out in the wilderness spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. Today our gospel message from Luke also begins with John the Baptist and what he had to say to those people who came out to hear him. We encounter what it means to prepare the way of the Lord. What he had to say does not seem to be a message many would like to hear. Luke 3: 7 states: John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” I don’t really like being named a viper, so this is not a favorite passage for me. It is more comfortable to read about John from the other accounts. In Matthew this accusation is directed not toward the general crowd, but to the Pharisees. We tend to think that sort of lets us off the hook as being included. When the accusation is made to the crowd, it is harder not to see ourselves there. But like them or not, these texts of judgment are there in scripture for a reason. The prophets and John the Baptist refuse to be silent in their day, and in ours. Even as we long for the arrival of the baby Jesus and the joy promised by Zephaniah, we look around our world today and it seems all too obvious that change is needed. John the Baptist’s harsh words are both resonant to the state of our world and are necessary for us to accept. It is all too obvious that repentance is required. Things and people need to be turned around. The first step in repentance is to recognize and accept our current status as vipers; those needing to be changed. After naming them vipers, those who are living in opposition to God’s ways, John tells those who have come to him two things. First, bear fruits worthy of repentance. Second, do not count on being descendants of Abraham or in other words any privileged status. John’s message continues to sound harshly in our ears. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” The crowd then asks: what do we do? Notice this is a corporate response. There is a collective nature to this. It is not: What do I do, but what do we do? The first question in our time when our culture is so keen on self-affirmation and independence, is can we accept John’s point that we are part of the poisonous lot of vipers? We tend not to take responsibility for the state of the problems facing us today. After all, global warming, racism, violence and so many more issues abounding in the world are not the results of my actions, are they? We are longing to put aside this talk of judgment and bask in the glow of the Christmas lights. Isn’t the news out there bad enough? Can’t we just come in here and rejoice? Well, not if we want our witness to have an impact on the world that is all too familiar with dangerous, poisonous vipers. Vipers who spread fear and anxiety. Vipers who thrive on suspicion and distrust. Vipers who enflame hatred. On this Sunday, as much as we want to concentrate on the joy of the season, we need to stop, repent and admit that we are, at best, complicit in the suffering that pervades the news. In some ways we have benefited from the actions and decisions which have led to this state. So, if we admit this. If we say, yes John we are a brood of vipers, curved in upon ourselves, prideful and prone to delusions of self-importance, what then are we to do? We yearn to be better, do better, live better. We know in our hearts that things are not as they

should be; within and around us, so what do we do to enable God's transformative power to bear fruit in us? If we look at the whole picture, we are likely to have trouble not only finding joy but also hope. Here John's message gets very concrete. It also gets very doable. Got two coats? Share with those who have none. Got more than enough food? Give away your abundance to those who are right now going hungry. Need more examples? Whatever your profession or occupation, do it with integrity and honesty. Those are pretty straightforward things. Those are pretty ordinary things. These seem like fairly small things. In the words of the popular NIKE slogan, just do it. In addition to those doables from John the Baptist, I would like to add one from Zephaniah 3:15 which says, "You shall fear disaster no more." The prophet, the angels who appeared to the shepherds and Jesus himself says, "Do not fear." In our world today fear is prevalent. As part of our witness we need to live showing our trust in God's presence and power. We need to balance prudence with taking risks for the sake of the Gospel. What would it look like if we look for opportunities each and every day to demonstrate those fruits of repentance? What if we acted on the belief that being honest, kind and hardworking in a culture that is impatient, immature and fearful really makes a difference. We live in a world that is constantly afraid that the next terrorist crime or random act of violence will happen around our street corner or to someone we love. And because of this fear we change how we live and risk forgetting who and whose we are. When judgment is pronounced in Scripture it is always linked to the failure of people to live according to the ways God has pronounced good. When the message of judgment is given, there is included a message of redemption. This passage in Luke ends with the pronouncement of an unquenchable fire for the chaff, but also with this exhortation being a part of the proclamation of the good news he was bringing to the people. In some real but mysterious way, the pronouncement of judgment which seems so harsh and such bad news is a call to transformation and an invitation to the joy found when the Lord is near. Thanks be to God.