

## Repentance and Joy

The passage from Luke's gospel we have before us gives us John the Baptist at the River Jordan talking to crowds who have come to hear his message. And the message he gives is a harsh one. "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him: "You brood of vipers! This message is used to prepare the way of the Lord; it is the message which God sent to prepare people to receive his coming into the world to dwell among us and seems to echo the words of his predecessors in the Hebrew Scriptures about God's displeasure and coming judgment. Reading that first verse we might wonder about how what he had to say was good news for his audience. He asks, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He goes on to proclaim that an axe is lying at the root of the trees and that all that do not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. This is the gospel passage's message on the Sunday we celebrate joy as our theme? We have three other passages, each of which lifts the call to be joyful. Reading the Hebrew Scripture for today from Isaiah 12, we find Isaiah's giving thanks to God. Here Isaiah's word to the people in exile is to "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth." His call to the people is to rejoice and sing, because in God's faithfulness to his people Isaiah trusts; proclaiming that the Lord God is his strength and his might. God has become Isaiah's salvation. Isaiah is proclaiming that he has found a source of joy despite the current circumstance and he will not fear. The Epistle reading from Philippians is dominated by the call to rejoice, and to do it always. We often fail to hold on to our joy and offer praise and thanks when everything is going well. Yet this exhortation is a call to do it no matter the circumstances and makes the promise that in doing so, that you will find the peace of God which passes all understanding. Paul wrote this to the church at Philippi from a Roman prison while awaiting his trial; not expecting freedom, but to be condemned and put to death. These writing giving thanks and calling for rejoicing are examples of a deep seated trust in the promises God has given—even when the writer was living in the midst of darkness. Paul writes that we should not be afraid, but trust God in everything for then Christ will guard our hearts and minds granting us the peace which surpasses all understanding. The prophet Zephaniah writings contain more words which resonate with those first ones we have recorded from John the Baptizer, yet in the passage before us today, he also speaks of rejoicing. In today's passage the cause is clear: the Lord is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory. Zephaniah was given a message warning people about their failures to live according to their covenant promises. This behavior was displeasing to God and would be judged. Yet in his final words he tells the people that God will renew them in love, removing disaster from them so that they will not bear reproach for it. He envisions that God will enter the situation saying "God is in your midst." What is interesting in this passage is Zephaniah's understanding about what will occur for not only the people will be filled with joy, but that God will exult over them with loud singing as on a day of festival. In many of the poetic sayings found in Isaiah even in the midst of the trial scenes depicted, Isaiah paints a picture of God's grief over the people's disobedience and failure to return to his ways. In Zephaniah words we see the other side; we see God's joy in the return of the people to his ways, to the time when God sees that the people will be gathered; God anticipates being able to bring the people home. Underlying all of these messages is the confidence that God and God's promises are to be trusted; the confidence that God is eternally faithful. As we journey in Advent we have the promise that

this birth will be the fulfillment of the Isaiah vision of peace, of life without pain or suffering, that spears will be turned into plowshares. But the promise of two thousand years remains only a promise. We all still live in the world of Zephaniah, a world of greed and war and lack of true religious faith and practice. When we pray the Lord's Prayer each week we ask for that vision when we ask for God's kingdom to come. What we are saying is that we want God to rule in our hearts and minds, in our lives and on the earth. But God's kingdom does not rule here and often God's kingdom ways do not rule our lives. We still need to hear the message given to John the Baptizer for how to prepare to truly receive the Lord and be ruled by those kingdom rules. John's message in this passage can be divided into roughly three sections. In verses 7-9 he addresses the potential excuses those in the crowd have for their transgressions. Those harsh opening words were addressed to any in the crowd who thought that either their heritage or their baptism alone would exclude them from judgment. What is need John proclaims is for their baptism and faith to bear "fruit". John tells them that no good tree will bear bad fruit, just as no bad tree will bear good fruit. Therefore he has brought them a message about repentance because if a tree has failed in one year but after another year it should bear good fruit, then "well and good." Each tree or person is to be known by the "fruit" they bear; by the lives they live. The crowd's response to this message of judgement and possible inclusion among those who would not face judgment was to ask how this was to be done. John then went on to give very concrete examples of the good fruit God seeks when the crowd asked him what to do. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none." "Whoever has food must do likewise." The passage points out that some who asked questions were among those who were distrusted and disliked by most in the Jewish community: tax collectors and those who served in the Roman army. John told them they were not excluded from the baptism of repentance which provided access to God's kingdom. What they needed to do was become bearers of good fruit in their lives—right where they were. Tax collectors were to only do their duty, taking only the tax and not more. The soldiers were likewise told to be satisfied with their wages and not use their position to extort money by threats or false accusations. The instructions given indicate that the crowd who formed John's audience were more than ordinary; they are, at best, the riff raff, poor crowds with little to offer. Yet they are not excluded from John's attention or the possibility of being able "to bear fruits worthy of repentance." If John instructs, rather than condemns, then he is stressing the message is for all people, then one might ask "who is excluded." The answer, as it turns out is no one. John preaches to all. Jesus comes for all. When Luke quotes Isaiah as saying that "all flesh shall see the salvations of God", he really means all. What else is also important about this message John gives that the tax collectors and soldiers are not called to sever their relationship with Rome. Even in the light of impending judgment, they are called to serve where they are; to take a stand for neighbor amid rather than apart from the turbulence and trouble of the times in which they live. They are called to do good rather than spite because of their compromised positions in Jewish society. Thus Luke's John hallows the mundane elements of daily life as service to God. They are not left with just a to-do list, but a way of life that can sustain them before God. When the people began to look to John, not as the one who was preparing them for the Messiah's coming but as the one who would fulfill God's promises to them, he quickly let them know that his role was different—the one who would come after him would be much

stronger—saying he was not even fit to untie the thong of his sandals. John’s description of the coming promised one was that while John’s baptism was with water, the water of repentance and forgiveness, the Messiah would baptize differently—with the Holy Spirit and fire. The end of the passage paints the picture of Jesus with a winnowing fork in his hand; coming to clear his threshing floor to gather the wheat into his granary but to then burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. We use water in our sacrament of baptism, even with the infants brought into God’s family this way. We view it as a symbol of the initiation of the child into God’s family. We also associate it with the property which water has to cleanse. We often view these words of John’s in the light of punishment and judgment and do not like associating them with Jesus. But just like the passage from last week, fire can also have a cleansing effect—the winnowing fork which Jesus has is the one which is used to transform us. Perhaps the wheat-chaff separation which Jesus is coming into the world to accomplish is not separating people into two groups—one containing “bad” persons and the other the “good” persons. Mr. Rogers who was a Presbyterian minister in his programs often pointed out even people who are bad most of the time will be good some of the time; and those who are good most of the time will be bad some of the time. The winnowing which Christ seeks to do in all of us is separating the good that is within each person from the bad that is within each person. So John prepares those in the crowd to understand their actions are not acceptable and urge them to change. He does this so that when Christ comes they will be aware and ready to have their unacceptable behavior altered by the baptism which Christ brings—the entry into their lives which will burn away those things not acceptable in a citizen of God’s kingdom. Knowing that the Holy Spirit is among us to lead us, to transform us so that we can be bearers of good fruit is the most important message to be found in this passage. It is definitely good news that our repentance and the changing of our ways to be fit to take up residence as citizens of God’s kingdom as we prepare to remember again Jesus’ as the one who came to dwell with us long ago and who is also Emmanuel—God with us—every day. Definitely reasons for joy to be present on this Advent journey. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.