

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Advent 3C
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God Is Not Fixing Things

Just checking – you brood of vipers - does this sound like good news to you? At first glance, I think I'd prefer to go back to the first readings. To Zephaniah rejoicing with gladness, because the Lord has taken away judgment and presumably all the sin that caused it, who now rejoices over us with gladness and renews us in great love. I'd like to go back to Isaiah whose voice rings out with joy, rejoicing in the Lord who has done great things for us, or even to Paul, whom I often find rather cranky... even Paul is rejoicing this morning and exhorting us to do the same. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! That all feels so much better than the "good news" brought to us this morning by John the Baptizer.

The third Sunday of Advent heralds a bit of a change for us. If you have an Advent wreath at home, you'll likely find that today's candle is pink. That pink candle in the Advent wreath signifies joy. No longer hearing only God's judgment of a world gone wrong, today we sing praises to the God who loves us, who has forgiven us, who has turned our shame into praises and our heartache into joy! Today we rejoice in the God who is making all things new and has promised always to be near. God is coming to be one of us, God loves us, God has claimed us as God's very own! No wonder Paul is doing the happy dance! Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice!

And then comes the roaring baptizer, shouting at us about the wrath to come, scolding us into repentance and calling us some pretty nasty names. Repent, you brood of vipers. What makes you think you'll escape the coming judgment? You think being the children of Abraham has you covered? God can turn stones into children of Abraham. Now there's a way to win over your listeners!

It seems that before all that rejoicing, there is repenting to be done. John's voice cried out in the wilderness of the Palestinian desert just as it cries out in our hearts today. Turn away from all that is evil and repent! Bear fruit worthy of the God who loves you! Look deep into your hearts, seek love and justice and peace, turn around and change your lives! Repent, repent, repent...

Being called a brood of vipers, being threatened by axes at the foot of the tree and unquenchable fire, being called to account and admonished to repent – you'd think that would send people running six ways to Sunday! Really. Think about it. Can you imagine what that would feel like? You've heard of this wild desert man who seems to be making a way for the promised Messiah, and you set out to find him. You walk a long way, watching and wondering, not fully understanding but still seeking the baptism he offers. And finally, finally you find him and what do you hear? *Repent, you brood of vipers!*

But shockingly, the people didn't run away. Instead, one by one, they asked "What do we need to do?" "And what do WE need to do?" "And what about us, what shall we do?" It's very important to listen to the way John answers their questions.

You. Yes you, the fashion queen. You have more coats, and probably more shoes, than you need. Share. And you over there, the foodie. You have food enough in your pantry to feed the neighborhood. Feed the neighborhood. And you, the one in the powerful position. Care more about justice than you do for getting ahead, and ensure fairness for all of the people you serve.

John speaks into each of their lives, offering real and tangible actions each one can take in their very real and tangible lives. He doesn't offer grandiose or universal platitudes about making the world a better place, instead he tells the people that the way they live their own daily lives... the way they choose to be consumers, the way they choose to behave when they go to work, the way they choose to use the power that they have – all of these things really matter. And while his answer differs for every questioner, each answer speaks very specifically into unique and specific lives. Every answer requires action, and every action has God's love as its source. Share. Don't keep more than you need. Treat others kindly. Tell the truth.

As we come ever closer to the nativity of the One who has come to be God with us, John the Baptizer reminds us – and in no small way – that Advent is a time for self-examination, and that our self-examination ought to lead us to take action right smack in the middle of our daily lives.

John's admonitions were never meant to be finger-pointing and blaming. And while we recognize that fact that he didn't have many social skills, I think his intention was to ask the best of people, to encourage them, to encourage us, to live lives of integrity and action.

He wasn't commanding the people to behave themselves so much as he was reminding them of who they were... oh I don't mean the brood of vipers part, I mean the part about bearing fruit.

"Don't climb the tree, sit on a branch and watch what is happening in the world below you," he seems to be saying. "Become the tree that bears fruit."

God will not swoop down and fix the world.

God came among us, came to be one of us, precisely to make this point.

God incarnates.

God incarnated in Mary's newborn baby boy and God incarnates in us, just the same.

God is not distant and manipulative.

God is present in each and every one of us and the way God works in the world is through OUR presence and action.

It is not enough to pray. It is not enough to hope. It is not enough to care. It is not even enough to love if our love does not move us to action. The *New York Daily News* said it best... God is not fixing things. And why? Dear ones, it's because we are not fixing things.

We can't simply pray for an end to violence. We need to change the structures that allow and encourage it.

We can't simply hope that there will be an end to hunger. We need to feed people.

We can't simply care about refugee families. We must have a hand in finding homes and communitites for them.

And we can't claim that we love our neighbors if we won't give them a ride, take them a meal, visit them when they are sick, and share in their heartaches as well as their joy.

Believing in God isn't an idea we carry around, it is a call to action. I think that's what John the Baptizer was trying to tell us.

It's a hard thing to be constantly hearing about end times in Advent. We like to think of Advent as a new beginning, as the season of hope and expectation, of watching and longing and wondering.

What about the baby Jesus we are waiting for?

What about the love and peace and reconciliation that he brings when he comes among us as the living God?

It's true, Jesus came, and comes among us as the living God, the God whose name is love. But as it turns out, that requires an apocalypse.

In order for Jesus to live in us, the ax must be put to the tree of self-importance. The chaff of greed and getting ahead must be burned away and turned to nothing but ash. The Advent of the newborn king the king of love, the redeemer of our whole crazy, violent, selfish and broken world really does herald the end of the world as we know it. No more hoping and praying for God to fix things. No more abstract caring about the world. No more talk of love without working for justice and peace and dignity for all people.

Advent is a time of watching and waiting and hope and expectation, but more than all of that, Advent is about desire.

It's about desire and longing and God coming to us and moving among us in ways we don't expect, and could never even imagine.

So slow down a bit. Make a space for quiet. Create room in your heart for the God of love and listen for what your unique ways of loving the world back into wholeness really are. And then do those things. Bear fruit. The whole wide world is watching and waiting and longing and hoping. Amen.