

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?
Zephaniah 3:14-18; Luke 3:10-18
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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As the world prepares for Christmas Day, the people of God prepare for the coming of Christ. There is a difference. Christmas is a holiday of family get-togethers and gift giving. Christ is the Son of God, who came to redeem and heal the world and make way for the coming of his eternal Kingdom. In the long run it's better to prepare for Christ and not just his birthday.

As you know, Advent is meant to be an intentional season of reflection, repentance and self-denial so when Christ does come near we will be prepared to experience joy and renewal.

In our Old Testament reading we heard, "Shout for joy...Rejoice exalt with your whole heart...The King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst ...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exalt over you with loud singing..." (Zephaniah 3:14-17)

Zephaniah was a prophet, a contemporary of Jeremiah who lived just before Jerusalem's downfall at the time of the Babylonian invasion six hundred years before Christ. Like Jeremiah, Zephaniah condemned the nation's political, social and religious corruptions. But the prophet's judgments gave way to the good news of the kingdom's return, when God's people will rejoice with loud singing in response to the Lord rejoicing over them.

Even when the nation was facing disaster and ruin, Zephaniah offered a glimmer of hope. Even if everything was falling apart God was still with them.

On this third Sunday in Advent we get a one-day reprieve from self-examination and self-denial to look ahead (if only briefly) to our celebration of God's gift of self. Today we are encouraged to be joyful, even though we are broken by sin and the world we find ourselves in is in crisis.

Of course, we can't force being joyful when there's so much wrong all about us, until we realize that real joy comes from knowing that despite our personal failures and the world's problems, God is still with us. We're never abandoned and left behind to fend for ourselves. No matter how bad it gets God is always here.

How can I say this?

This is where faith comes in. You trust even though you can't see. You believe only because God gives you the ability to believe.

To honest skeptics and hard-nosed cynics alike, this sounds like a bill of goods. To them, religion is a crutch, an excuse to rationalize and accept suffering and injustice in this life in exchange for a better future in the next. How can you not think that when you're deep down in the pit?

And yet, many people still believe even when everything is busted beyond repair God is here. They're not happy about their present situation, who in their right mind would be? Even so, they are blessed with a joy-filled trust that God is in the mix and in the end the Lord will prevail. Why? God's grace is sufficient.

As you read Luke's account of John the Baptist's impact on the multitude of people who journeyed far from home to hear his message, you can sense their hope and expectation even though for them life was very hard. They lived in dangerous times, hand to mouth, and paid heavy taxes to their Roman masters. For five hundred years God's people waited for a word from the Lord and then, suddenly, John the Baptist popped up from out of nowhere. That explains why people left their farms and villages to make the long trek into the wilderness, expecting to hear the Messiah had finally arrived.

Right away John set them straight. He was not the Anointed One. He only came to prepare the way for someone greater than himself.

After disappointing them, John went on to dump on them. His message was harsh and joyless, filled with condemnation and stark demands for repentance, justice.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Do not say, "We have Abraham as our ancestor, for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the foot of the trees; every fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:7-9)

Translation: Just because you all happen to belong to the right tribe, don't kid yourselves into believing you're off the hook. If you don't hurry up and straighten up, God will cut you down, throw you into the fire and look elsewhere for new children of Abraham to take your place.

Let's give credit to these people who came out looking for John and still took him seriously even after being called a pack of snakes. The normal reaction to criticism is to become insulted and defensive. That's when the "Just who do you think you are?" syndrome kicks in. But not this time. John's listeners were ripe to hear the truth even if it hurt. They accepted his verdict without complaint and then asked for specific instructions on how to turn things around.

"What are we supposed to do?" they asked.

John's answer was simple and practical. Share with one another. If you have two coats, give one to someone who has nothing. If you have more food than you need, then feed the hungry. You've been treated generously so live generously.

Suddenly tax collectors, known for their cheating ways, spoke up. "What should we do?" Again John's answer was simple and practical. "Only collect the amount you're supposed to collect, no more, no less." Be fair and honest with your neighbors. They'll bless you for it."

Then the soldiers in the crowd spoke up. Like the tax collectors they were feared and hated. John answered them by saying, "Don't abuse your authority, don't bully or extort money from the people you're sworn to protect. Be satisfied with your wages.

Keep in mind John began by condemning, even insulting his listeners, but he finished by passing on simple, practical things they could do to make things right. John didn't burden them with impossible demands, he only urged them to share, don't steal or hit, play fair and be kind to one another.

These are things we all can do with little effort, if we want to. Whatever tax bracket you find yourself in, you are capable of being thoughtful and generous. You can share with those who need help not once in a while, but regularly.

You can give your time and energy to a worthy cause. Because of Jesus coming into the world, you are freed up to make your neighborhood more livable. Simply put, if you choose to, you can treat others as you want to be treated. You can stop being judgmental of people who aren't as smart and superior as you are. You can stop waiting to be served and turn around to serve others.

Of course before any of these things can happen you have to remember what John said earlier, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin by saying I have Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and go your merry way, harboring old grudges and prejudices, making excuses for not getting your hands dirty and avoiding the messy situations that need cleaning up. Don't say, "I do enough so don't ask me to do more," when Christ comes knocking at your door.

We all need to hear these things, be willing to be corrected and repent before we can put into practice John's simple, practical suggestions. Only then will we be prepared for the coming of the Lord.

One of the readings for this third Sunday in Advent comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians. If you're ready to repent, that is turn away from your old ways to embrace the new, Paul's words will speak to you and impact your celebration of the "Word becoming flesh to dwell among us filled with grace and truth.

Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but in everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.