

St. Paul's Congregational Church
December 16, 2018, Advent 3C
Isaiah 12: 2-6; Luke 3:7-18
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent - the Sunday of Joy – when we light the pink candle on our wreath. Today's scriptures underline our call to rejoice: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near." And the prophet Isaiah tells us to rejoice and sing the praises of the Lord, "for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel." We know that Advent is a season of waiting, expectation, and preparation for the coming of the Lord – and we know that Jesus the Christ will be born very soon. We certainly want to rejoice in that good news.

But then there's John the Baptist: in our Gospel reading we hear again for the second week in a row, that straight-talking, wild-eyed preacher and prophet. Today he's yelling at those who came out to be baptized by him, calling them, "You brood of vipers!" This sure doesn't sound like he is rejoicing. Honestly, it's a challenge to connect this message easily with the theme of "Joy" given to this Third Sunday in Advent.

This week, though, I saw something different about John the Baptist and his message – it's true that he's not only yelling at the powers-that-be (the religious authorities, the puppet rulers, the empire) but also at all of the sincerely open people who have bothered to come out here in the middle of nowhere to listen to his warning messages. We might think that those who came and were yelled at would turn around and leave. But they didn't. John may sound harsh to us, but people probably felt his sincerity, his telling the truth with love, and his concern for the people. These people not only don't leave, but they stay and ask John for an alternative: "What then should we do?" — a true wish to repent, to get into action so as to turn from their old ways of life. John the Baptist knows the Messiah is coming soon. He feels the urgency, he wants ALL people to be prepared and to bear fruit. He gives them advice.

John's advice to the crowd is much easier than Jesus'. John tells people to share what they have—an easier task than when Jesus tells the young man to sell all he owns. John says if they have two coats, share. If they have food, share. In other words, care for others who have less than they do.

Then come the tax collectors. They too ask, “What should we do?” At that time, the tax collectors were mostly Jews hired by the Romans; these collectors were paid a portion of whatever they collected, so they tended to collect more than was required from the people. John tells them to be fair and not to collect more than they should.

And the third group, the soldiers, probably Roman. They ask the same: “What should we do?” This time, John tells them not to exploit people or make false accusations. That is, they should live with integrity and honor.

Look at the diversity of the gathered crowd: it seems to represent the Jews who have enough; the tax collectors, the outcasts; and the soldiers, the gentiles. They all seek to change their lives. Even though John is harsh in the beginning, he gives advice to them all. John’s advice is not dramatic – it’s really pretty simple - he just asks them to turn from what they are doing their *own* way, and instead to start doing things the *right* way—*God’s* way.

The people want to change and are waiting for their Messiah to come. With John’s urgent teaching, they suspect him to be that Messiah, but he knows his call is to clear the way for the real one to come. John is to introduce the coming of Jesus, guiding people to see God’s way. He tells the people that the Messiah, the Christ, is coming with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus the Christ will come with the power and great might of God to be among us. The great fire is to cleanse us from our wrongdoings.

John the Baptist is teaching us to care for those in need, to seek justice, and to have integrity. Actually, all that is part of what following Jesus the Christ is about – and it is really pretty simple, isn’t it. Maybe that’s where the rejoicing comes in.

John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, a place where one may get lost, a barren place that seems to have no life or hope.

Wilderness is a good metaphor for us right now. Today we are in a world bombarded with all sorts of news, much of it bad, from more sources now than we could have imagined even 10 years ago: TV, radio, print of course, but now our hand-held devices and social media keep us “in touch” every minute of every day, no matter where we are. All the time we are faced with news and fake news, truth and alternate truth, facts and alternative facts. Pictures of starving children in Yemen. Charges of corruption rampant in our government. There seems to be no peace in the world. Natural disasters are happening more often than usual. And this week a 7 year old migrant child died in a detention center at our New Mexico border. And if all these reports aren’t bad enough, we can check our bank balances and the stock market and see how they reflect, minute by minute, what we read about in the world around us. The bad news just keeps

constantly getting worse. All this could make you and me want to run out to the wilderness in search of better news, a word of hope, something to come that's worth preparing for.

The crowd listening to John the Baptist asked, "What should we do?"

We Christians ask the same question: "What should we do?"

Things were all out-of-whack, they had gone awry, the world was being held "upside-down" by the ones on top, and John calls the people, calls us, to prepare for what they had been waiting for all these years: he holds out the old hopes of the Hebrews, still alive and still strong even after six hundred years of the journey to the promised land, to the promised coming of the Messiah. He says that this very moment is the moment for which their grandmothers waited, this moment is the moment about which they sang. The Messiah is coming!

For all of us on this Third Sunday in Advent, I believe this is the message of good news.

Is that what John knew about the people, that they came out there longing to hear good news? Did he sense their deepest hungers, their profound and perhaps unspoken hope? Scholars say that things were nearing a breaking point at the time, so the people were ready, even if they didn't know exactly what they were ready for. That seems to describe today too, doesn't it.

These people did listen, as we hear in today's reading. Scholars tells us that we should not misunderstand the phrase "prophet in the wilderness" as one who is ignored; John was not "failed or unheeded" but a prophet who "announces the opening of the way to freedom and salvation"--which, ironically, was often found in the wilderness, for the people of Israel.

John knew his audience, his congregation, and he read the signs of the times as well. He had to help them "unforget" the promises that had sustained their ancestors for so long, in wilderness and exile. What is striking about this preacher, though, is that his rhetoric combines grand anticipation and dramatic warning with an exhortation, a simple instruction, that is so down-to-earth, so everyday life, so...doable – then and now.

He doesn't tell the people to get back to church, to overthrow the Romans, to transform the world in some sudden, drastic revolution. No, he tells them the same things that our parents told us, that parents tell their children today: "Share with one another. Be kind to one another. Don't fight. Be fair. Don't hoard, or lord it over one another."

What should we do? What can we do?

It seems to me that at the heart of John's message is that basic justice and goodness can and will knock the supports out from under every out-of-

whack, misaligned, upside-down, oppressive structure and system that we've built. A justice and goodness that would take the air, the power, out of every process and habit that we humans have practiced and perfected and with which we have hurt one another, and one another's children.

Whether we're sitting in church this Sunday or not, we may very well be thinking to ourselves, "What should we do?"

It seems to me that the One who chose to come into the world as a little baby in a humble manger, mothered by a young girl confused by, but cooperative with, the Spirit at work in her life – that One calls us to that same basic goodness and justice that John calls the people to live out in their everyday lives: "Do not use your power to injure," he says.

How simple, how powerful.

"What then should we do?" John jars us with his message into looking afresh at our lives, our priorities and preoccupations, our style of living. Let's check out our lives in the mirror of how others might see us: how recognizable we are as followers of Jesus? We might wonder whether they would know, as Jesus promised, that we are Christians by the way we love one another and the world. Our lives count and what we do counts too. Isn't that good news? How could it be anything but good news if God is going to come and make things right again? What a reason for joy that is!

Walter Brueggemann makes John's message sound clear and simple, however unwelcome it might be to the powerful, the comfortable, the elite in a world, a culture, a nation, like ours! He writes, "Advent is concrete and it concerns neighbor stuff." And he continues, "to be good neighbors, we need to spend Advent not in composing lists of what we want, or what we'll buy for those who already have an excess of goods, but in 'rethinking the contrast...between 'multicoat people' and 'no-coat people.'" And he says this is NOT "a nice little charity gesture!" This message becomes even more stark when we remember that "in antiquity a coat was not only for dress but also for warmth at night." Can we even imagine having only one coat that also functions as our blanket at night? And yet surely God sees this kind of suffering, and is moved.

We may not want to hear a message of judgment this Advent, indeed at any time, but we do need to be reminded of what the Messiah we await is about: bringing "God's justice to the world, and this would involve naming and dealing with evil." This message is exactly what we and the world – need and must hear and then, in turn, proclaim and act on. In advent, the church needs to recover its prophetic voice, like Isaiah, and then go out into the wilderness, like John, and prepare the world for the new thing that God

is about to do, ending the hunger, the poverty, the inequity that afflicts the world today.

That's the good news we are called, even compelled to share, the hope that sustains us, the vision toward which we move and work, It's no wonder then, and not so very difficult to understand why, we live in joy as well. We are called to change our way of life. The gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" is increasing in society; are we willing to share with those with less? Or are we to continue taking more from others who are already struggling to fill their pockets, to continue to benefit ourselves? Are we to elevate our status at the expense of hurting others? Are we to offer false accusations by telling half-truths or even totally lying? Are we willing to call out ourselves and those who do these things?

John the Baptist has told us to be prepared for the coming of Christ. Are we willing to turn around? Are we courageous enough to hear and heed his prophetic voice?

I came across a hymn written on this text by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette that has touched me deeply, especially after the events of the past week, that I feel called to share with you. She introduces it this way: "As we await the birth of our Savior, as we wait to worship the newborn King, as we remember how his parents fled with him into Egypt, we pray for children today, including those separated from their families at the border between the United States and Mexico, the thousands of immigrant children and youth who are in detention centers in the U.S., and the little ones who must appear alone in court before an immigration judge." Please hear these words:

"John Proclaimed It: "Change Your Lives!""

John proclaimed it: "Change your lives!
 Brood of snakes! Come, be baptized!
 Who warned you to flee what's near?
 There is wrath that's coming here.
 God has called you! Have you heard?
 God has said a mighty word!
 Listen, people! Turn from wrong.
 Turn around and sing God's song.
 Seek God's justice! Pave the way!
 God is bringing this new day."

People asked him, "How can we
 Turn and serve God faithfully?"
 John responded, "Be the good
 In your home and neighborhood."
 God has called you! Have you heard?
 God has said a mighty word!
 Listen, people! Turn from wrong.
 Turn around and sing God's song.
 Seek God's justice! Pave the way!
 God is bringing this new day."

"Have two coats? Now go and share
 With the poor one shivering there.
 Spread God's joy and seek to bring
 Justice where there's suffering.
 Don't be greedy, wanting more.
 Don't use threats and hurt the poor.
 Listen people! Turn from wrong.
 Turn around and sing God's song.
 Seek God's justice! Pave the way!
 God is bringing this new day."

Holy Child, what can we bring?
 What's a gift to give a King?
 As we ask you, children wait
 Locked behind detention's gate.
 You wait with each migrant child,
 And with every mother mild,
 And with every father, too—
 Asking us, "What will you do?"
 May we seek to pave the way,
 Bringing justice each new day.

Biblical Reference: Luke 3:7-18

Tune: Felix Mendelssohn, 1840 ("Hark! The Herald Angels Sing") ([MIDI](#))

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May God the Almighty with the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit stir our hearts, our minds, our feet, and our voices to truly repent and to follow Christ with hope and joy! Amen.