

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

December 12, 2021 – ADVENT 3, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Experiencing the JOY of Jesus*”

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (A promise of God’s renewal, restoration, and healing)
Canticle 9 (BCP 86) (Surely, it is God alone who can save us)
Philippians 4:4-7 (Fix your attention on good things that come from God)
St. Luke 3:7-18 (St. John exhorts the people to justice, calling them to baptism)

Today’s Gospel reading is unusual, in that Jesus is not actually mentioned. Rather, the lesson focuses on the ministry of John the Baptizer, a fiery prophet in the Old Testament style. He joins with the prophet Zephaniah—who wrote seven centuries before Christ—in censuring Israel for her idolatry and corruption. I find it interesting that both John and Zephaniah, while separated by millennia, share similar messages, as they look for the coming of the Lord’s salvation and restoration, and call God’s people to spiritual repentance and works of justice and mercy.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is always *Gaudete* Sunday, from the Latin word for “rejoice.” We lit a candle to celebrate Jesus as our JOY, and the vestments of the day are a cheery rose pink. But where can we find that joy amidst John’s apocalyptic preaching and Zephaniah’s cries of reproach, shame, and disaster? Perhaps we need to look deeper into the words of the prophets.

The book of Zephaniah concludes with a vision of a restored Israel. This is our reading for today. Here, God shows the prophet that the exiled nation *will* return home; all their enemies will be defeated; and God will reign as king. Israel, formerly enslaved, will gain fortune and renown, such that praise and rejoicing will resound throughout the land.

Likewise, John points toward the great transformation that Jesus the Messiah will bring, declaring: “One who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and [with] fire.” Not only does he who baptizes with water foresee the power and authority of Christ to bring salvation, but also John envisions that divine power stretching all the way to the Day of Pentecost. On that glorious occasion, after Jesus had returned to heaven, He came once more as the Holy Spirit, descending on His followers like flames of fire, to make them bold and zealous to build His Church throughout the world.

You see, we do have reasons to rejoice! Christ is coming, and He will not leave us in our sins or abandon us to our unjust ways. Even so, He asks that we cooperate with Him in turning our lives around. So, on this “Rejoice” Sunday, amidst the joy of anticipating the advent of God into the world in the person of Jesus, His Son, let’s pause to listen to this harsh prophet standing knee-deep in the cold waters of the Jordan River. Let us hear judging words, even if they strike a familiar chord or cause us to squirm and want to turn away.¹

Our Lord comes not only to *save* us but also to *change* us. Or, using St. John’s colorful imagery, He comes to convert these stones, these hearts of stone, into children, His children. This is Jesus, who will turn everything the world has ever known—including us—upside-down, until all Creation submits to His gracious rule.

So let us not seek to escape the Baptizer’s judgment with polite platitudes and worn-out excuses. Rather, let us heed the words of the prophet, and bear fruit that is evidence of repentance. If we *are* truly sorry for our sins and commit to at least *trying* to live better, we then need to step out and do even more of the good works that are worthy of the God who has come among us.²

It is highly commendable that St. John’s parish has such an extensive ministry to the organizations and constituencies we’ve adopted for our annual outreach. On the other hand, how often do we remember—even in our prayers—the homeless who live in their cars at the far end of the Walmart parking lot, or sleep under bridges?

According to recent data, while Chester County is one of the wealthiest in Pennsylvania, on any given day, 684 persons are homeless. Combine that with the 422 homeless people in Lancaster County, and that's over 1,000 men, women, and children who have nowhere to live.³ And now, winter is coming.

Do we ever stop to think about the hidden pain of opioid addiction or domestic violence, both of which have escalated dramatically during these tough economic and social times? Are we aware that many children regularly go to school without breakfast or are not dressed in warm enough clothing?

St. John not only called the people of Israel to repentance for their personal sins, but to social justice and acts of mercy. Back in 2005, in Pope Benedict XVI's first "tweet" as pontiff, he counseled 21st-century Christians to "Listen to Christ ... speak with Jesus in prayer, listen to what He tells you in the Gospel, and look for Him in those [who are] in need." Funny how God's truth just doesn't change.

You've heard me quote from the wisdom of the Charles Schultz, the creator of the comic strip "Peanuts." One of the most stirring indictments of the Church ever penned was made by Mr. Schultz many years ago. In that strip, Snoopy was shown shivering out in a snowstorm beside an empty food dish. He looked longingly, expectantly, toward the house. Lucy came out and said, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled!" Then she turned, went back into the house, and slammed the door. In the last frame, a confused beagle dog could be seen staring toward the house, still shivering and hungry, now utterly baffled.⁴

In James 2:16, our Lord's brother indicts Christians who are like Lucy: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

In "Peanuts," Lucy's character is self-centered, arrogant, and cynical. In the strip I cited, she didn't feel like sacrificing her time or resources, her space or her heart, her feelings or desires, to meet Snoopy's needs. As kindhearted and generous as each of us believes ourselves to be, *every one of us* has selfish moments when we neglect others—either materially or emotionally—even those who are closest to us, and for whom we care.

We imitate Christ's selfless character when we sacrifice our most precious commodity—time—to do something for a family member; help an elderly neighbor; visit a homebound fellow parishioner; or simply set aside a half-hour or so to *pray for* those who are in every kind of need. We imitate Christ's sacrificial love when we donate *new* clothes, our favorite foods, or special goodies, instead of cans that are due to expire or stuff we just don't want any more. We live Christ's sacrificial love when we turn away from the TV or the computer in order to comfort a crying grandchild—or pet—or spend quality time with our spouse, parent, or a friend, even though it may mean staying up late that night to finish some work or get all those emails answered.⁵

A few years ago, my Bishop in Albany wrote about his mission trip to the Sudan, in which God strongly convicted him about the difference between what he *wanted*, and what he simply *needed*. (That's something St. Francis of Assisi also had a lot to say about.) As this Christmas approaches, once again we hear the ancient prophets as well as contemporary leaders of the Church calling us to deeper spiritual practice. Together with God, all of them invite us to ask ourselves: "What don't I need?" rather than "What do I want?" And "How can I help someone else?" rather than "How can I get what I want?"

Whatever the nature of your business or your *busy-ness*, there's only one thing all of us should put on our Christmas "to do" list, only one thing we *all* "want" and "need"—love. Christ demonstrated love characterized by both justice and mercy when He became one of us, and lived, died, and rose from the dead for us.

St. John the Evangelist tells us in 1 John 4:12-21: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. ... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ... We love because he first loved us.

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”

It may seem that John the Baptist’s words are harsh and condemning. But if we look more deeply into his message, we see that he truly is calling people not only to repentance, but also to greater love for one another—through sacrificial generosity and selfless giving. When we can do this with glad hearts, we will experience the joy that we celebrate this Sunday, the joy of humbly serving Jesus, of being the only hands, feet, mind, heart, voice, and checkbook Christ has on earth, until He comes again.

I’d like to close with a prayer by Fr. Henri Nouwen:

“Lord Jesus, master of both the light and the darkness,
 send Your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.
 We who have so much to do
 seek quiet spaces to hear Your voice each day.
 We who are anxious over many things
 look forward to Your coming among us.
 We who are blessed in so many ways
 long for the complete joy of Your kingdom.
 We whose hearts are heavy
 seek the joy of Your presence.
 We are Your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking light.
 To you we say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ Amen.”⁶

¹ Adapt. William H. Willimon in *The Christian Century*, 8 December 1982, qtd. “A Call for Repentance,” *Synthesis Year C: Advent 3* (16 December 2012), p. 3.

² Adapt. Willimon, *op. cit.*

³ “Homelessness in Chester County,” *Phoenixville Women’s Outreach*, n.d. <<https://phxvillewomensoutreach.org/homelessness-in-chester-county>> 6 December 2021; “Homeless Shelters Directory,” n.d. *Homeless Shelter Directory* <<https://www.homelessshelterdirectory.org/county/pa-lancaster>> 6 December 2021.

⁴ Adapt. Danny Presswood, “Abounding Love,” *SermonCentral.com* <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/abounding-love-danny-presswood-sermon-on-christmas-advent-131358.asp>> 15 December 2012.

⁵ Adapt. Presswood, *op. cit.*

⁶ Henri Nouwen, qtd. “A Call for Repentance,” *Synthesis Year C: Advent 3* (16 December 2012), p. 2.