

HOMILY ADVENT SUNDAY 3-C “Believe, Repent, Love and Rejoice”

(Zephaniah 3:14-18; Isaiah 12; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18)

(Note: much of the material is from the homiletic service *preparethe word.com*)

A little boy walked down the beach, and as he did, he spied a matronly woman sitting under a beach umbrella on the sand. He walked up to her and asked, “Are you a Christian?” “Yes,” she replied. “Do you read your Bible every day?” She nodded her head. “Do you pray often?” the boy asked next, and again she answered, “Yes.” With that he asked his final question, “Then will you hold my quarter for me while I go swimming?”

If asked on a quiz show, “Who in the bible said, ‘Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none?’” most of us would likely answer, incorrectly, “Jesus.” Although we have only limited testimony to the power of John the Baptist’s peaching, what we have strongly suggests that he and Jesus were kindred spirits with a shared message.

That message is startlingly simple: Believe, Repent, Learn to Love and you will Rejoice.

Rejoicing because our God is among us is a striking common thread throughout the first two readings and the psalm today. That is why today is called Gaudate Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing - the Sunday that we light a pink candle in the advent wreath. .

There are very legitimate reasons to feel lighter during this season. Children happily look forward to a school break, not to mention presents under the tree. Adults get to enjoy more relaxed office hours, staff parties and Christmas dinners. People on the streets are more likely to smile at strangers, laugh and even sing along with the familiar carols. Everywhere there are lights and symbols of festivity and even faith. It is a season geared for happiness, for togetherness, for a softening of the heart and release of old grudges. “Joy to the world” does seem an appropriate sentiment right about now. Why not go with the flow and rejoice?

Yet, underneath the atmosphere of levity and cheer, we know that all is not right with the world. Just below the surface of this holiday season lurks all the reasons the world has always had for sorrow. War and violence; bigotry and poverty; hunger and misery; loss and death have not gone away just because we’ve scattered tinsel and sung, “T’is the season to be jolly.” For too many of our brothers and sisters, this Advent is just another month of the year, and Rejoice Sunday just another day of struggle. How do we surrender to personal happiness, let alone ritual joy, when we know what the news of the day will be for so many?

The characters in the gospel of Luke ask John the same question three times: “What should we do?” It is obviously a critical question for Luke. Paul also asks it on the road to Damascus, and each disciple also must ask it on the road to following Jesus. What is the

right thing for a person of faith to do in the face of a world full of misery? I may be responsible for only a fraction of the evil in the world, or I may be a victim of some of it - either way, it seems so vast and we are so insignificant – what can we do to make a difference?

Actually, John the Baptist is a beautiful man to meet between the two great testaments. He is practical, up front and on a mission. He knows the situation of the world, believes in the One who is to come, and has a single goal to prepare the way for that One who is already in the area. So what does John do? He baptizes all comers because the only thing we have time for in this brief season of preparation is to turn our life around. Right now – immediately. There is no time to waste. That is what baptism means – death to the old way; life to the new. When the One who is to come is in our midst, complete personal transformation is the only adequate response.

John's answers to the question "What must we do?" are to the point: of the crowds he demands they share of their goods with the poor; of the tax collectors he demands rigorous honesty, and of the soldiers he demands justice and fairness.

John recognised that the sign of water, though powerful, was not enough by itself to save the people, so he spoke of one who would baptize with fire. Water cleanses; fire transforms. Signs are useless without a vital connection to their deeper meaning.

Accepting baptism was the outward sign of the inward embrace of transformation. John could only point out sin; Jesus would take it away through forgiveness. John could only invite people to change; Jesus could transform their hearts. To prepare the way for Jesus, the crowds had to receive John's baptism, and the fire of sharing of their goods with the poor. The tax collectors had to go under the water, and undergo the fire of being honest. The soldiers had to go into the river, and experience the fire of becoming just and fair in their work. Belief in Jesus is all about transformation – we cannot stay the same. The words of Zephaniah ring clear: "He will renew us with his love." Personal transformation and loving others, giving them reasons to rejoice, is the source of genuine Christian joy.

Walter Bruggemann, the great prophet-preacher-teacher of our times, insists that there has been only one Word of God from Moses to Jesus, and that is "neighbour, neighbour, neighbour." When Jesus was asked to determine the greatest commandment, he delivered two: Love God and neighbour. People must have balked at that, Bruggemann says, and reminded Jesus they only asked for one command. To which Jesus must have replied, "You cannot have only one. You always get two. Love of God, and love of neighbour."

The Christopher Leadership Course that is still offered in parts of our diocese holds within it the spirit of John the Baptist. The spirituality within the course sets it apart from other effective speaking courses. The motto of the Christophers is "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." An integral part of the course is the commitment by each student to carry out a specific service project that will spread the warmth, light and love of Christ into the world.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is another opportunity for us to open our hearts to the One who comes so humbly in Word, each other and gifts of bread and wine. May our celebration empower us to go out and live that Word of Love who is Jesus present among us.

On this Gaudate Sunday, John the Baptist reveals the one and only way to joy: Give your neighbour reason to rejoice. You and I need not feel embarrassed to express our joy in a world full of suffering because, when done properly, Christian rejoicing does bring joy to the whole world. We rejoice that we have an extra cloak to share with the one who has none. We give generously because we have been given so much. We also refrain from getting ahead at the expense of others, and we commit ourselves to raising our voices on behalf of those who do not share in our abundance.

As John advised all seekers, we give in keeping with our resources, our vocations, and our opportunities. There is enough joy to go around, enough joy for the whole world, if we take our baptism as seriously as John took his.