

This third Sunday in Advent is traditionally called “Rejoice Sunday.” Our Psalm sings this promise: “*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*” From the prophet Zephaniah: “*the Lord is in our midst: you shall fear disaster no more.*” From Paul in his letter to the folks in Philippi: Don’t worry, ease up on being anxious, because “*the Lord is at hand. Let God know what you need, pray, praise, and give thanks.*” God is with us, Emmanuel. So, Rejoice!

Rejoice! Yet, Zephaniah spoke to folks who didn’t have much to rejoice about. They had been carried off into exile, and their Temple — the visible anchor of God’s presence and blessing — had been destroyed. And Paul’s letter wasn’t exactly written on stationery from the Rome Hilton. He was imprisoned for preaching about Jesus, and knew that, in this life, he might never be freed.

Yet both Zephaniah and Paul dare to speak about rejoicing, and they encourage living with confident hope in a loving and gracious “*God with us,*” even in the midst of the pain, suffering, and tragedy that human life must face.

The first two lessons and the psalm for today are clear: Rejoice, don’t get tied up in worry or fear. They *seem* to make quite a contrast to the Gospel reading. Preacher John the Baptist lays into the people who had come out to hear him. “*You brood of vipers, God’s going to chop you down and throw you into the fire.*” And then there’s that unquenchable *fire* again. Well, Dale Carnegie he wasn’t. This doesn’t sound at all like “don’t worry, be happy.”

Yet, immediately the Gospel text calmly asserts, “*So, with many other exhortations, John preached good news to the people.*” Really? Good news. Hmm. I wonder how many turned away in anger when John told them how things used to be didn’t matter, and relying on their ethnic and national identity wasn’t going to cut it with God. What were they doing with their own lives *now*? Surely those who turned their backs on John weren’t buying that “*good news*” thing. And it doesn’t take long before we hear of one very significant response to John’s preaching: King Herod put him in prison. And Paul was also in prison when he wrote to the church in Philippi. And yet he says, don’t be anxious.

*Rejoice!* How do we dare to tell people to just “rejoice?” Rejoice, while the days are getting colder, the nights are getting longer, and the darkness deepens? In our darkest and starkest days, God’s promise of renewal abides-- daily, yet so often hidden. *Rejoice and give thanks!* While it is still almost winter to celebrate the spring? *Yes!* To celebrate the victory of God over all that oppresses, to proclaim even *now* that that crippling fear, killing hunger, deadly despair, hardened hatred-- those powers will not have the last word.

We all experience fears and anxieties--fear of the unknown, fear of abandonment, fear of losing loved ones, fear of our own dying. Our fears can tell us about our life--where there is danger, where our limits are, what we value. Being afraid can be a self-preservation mechanism. Our fears can also signal our need to trust God.

Fear can be useful, but our fears can function to wall us off from God and others, too. Protecting yourself too much can be fatal:

There's the story of a man who kept 30 dogs in his backyard for protection. One day neighbors heard him calling for help, and when the first responders came, his 30 snapping dogs kept them all at bay. When, 45 minutes later, they finally distracted the dogs with fire extinguishers, it was too late. That man thought he was protecting himself with those 30 dogs. But instead of preserving his life, they contributed to his death.

What are those things that we think will protect us and preserve our life, but don't? Howard Hughes had gathered more money in his life than most of us can imagine, yet he died, all alone and living *as if* he didn't have a dime. A carelessly kept gun, assumed to be there for protection, can end up tragically in the hands of a toddler, or bring about many other heart-breaking unintended outcomes.

In today's gospel, John warns his listeners that the axe is laid to the root of the tree. Not generally what would make us think of rejoicing. But John named the hopeful *possibility of repentance*, and at least some of the people took it seriously. "*What then shall we do?*" John tells them that you don't have to mend the whole world, just take steps to deal honestly and compassionately with others in the immediate situation of your own life.

What good does it do us to rejoice? Well, for one thing, when you're rejoicing, you are less likely to be anxious, or self-conscious, or worry or fret, or fight, or cheat. Paul proclaims that because the Lord is at hand, we can rejoice, and rejoicing, we can loosen our grip on our anxieties-- *will I be safe, will my friends like me, will I do well enough on my job, will I have what I need?* Paul says, let God know your concerns, and God who knows exactly what we need and when we need it, will take care of us. We can give joyful thanks for this, and we can know then a holy peace that can carry us through anything that we must face.

God's love came to dwell among us. This care for us was demonstrated most powerfully in the midst of the unspeakable violence and cruelty of a crucifixion. With Christ's resurrection, God reminds us that while death is real, it will *never be the last word* for us.

Trusting God to care for us, we are then freed to focus our thoughts, our prayers, and our actions, on service and advocacy for *others*, rather than being mired in worry about *our own* situation. God is at hand, even when we have trouble seeing it. We can pray for the peace of God, which keeps us going even while we are still in the desert, still waiting. And while you're waiting, look for ways to work toward the things that you are waiting for.

"Serve God where you are" and the fruits of a changed life will serve others, even as they encourage our own hearts. *What then shall we do?* Trust the voice of our Lord among us saying, "*Fear not, and follow me.*" Follow me with your whole life. God says, give your life to me. I will bless it and use it.

We can rejoice, because as we prepare to share a foretaste of the feast to come, we can trust that we do not need to be afraid. This gives courage to act when we can and patience to wait when we must. With that promise we can comfort each other when our hearts are broken. This trust can call out of us more than we could give on our own. We can discover and rejoice that God uses even our frail humanity, a stable and a cross, our weariness and our wilderness.

And as we make our way, we strain our ears to hear faint echoes from a hillside near Bethlehem: “*An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people. . .’*” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.