

Rejoice in the Lord

Advent 3 Year C – Philippians 4:4-9 and Luke 3:7-18

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, Dec 13, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I just can't help it. When I hear this morning's Epistle reading, my mind just automatically calls up a couple of songs from my past. The first is a song we used to sing in Sunday School when I was a little boy, a round that takes Paul's words and repeats them over and over, "Rejoice in the Lord...always, and again I say rejoice." The *other* one, I'm a little embarrassed to admit, is a catchy Reggae song that grabbed hold of my consciousness, and just about everyone else's, at the end of the 80's. It's likely you'll date yourself as badly as I have by admitting it, but maybe some of you remember, "Don't worry, be happy!"

Then along comes John the Baptist in our reading from the *Gospels*. No "happy, happy, joy, joy" for the camel skin wearing, locust munching prophet of the wilderness. "You brood of vipers!" he shouts. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

What is *with* the folks who set up the Lectionary this morning? Today, we light the rose candle of our Advent wreath in honor of the traditional name for this Sunday, *Gaudete*, or Joy Sunday. Here in the middle of the solemn preparation of Advent, we are meant to be reminded that there is great *joy* in the expectation of the coming of our Lord. Joy as we await the coming of Jesus Christ as the babe in Bethlehem. Joy as we await Christ's coming again in power and glory. Joy as we witness to his daily coming into our lives.

Yet, our readings from Luke and Philippians seem to have contradictory advice as to how to do that. One seemingly says, "Don't worry, be happy. Throw another shrimp on the barbee. Kick back and relax, the Lord is near!" The other seems to tell us to prepare for the Lord's coming by straightening up, by flying right, by getting our acts together... or *else!* "Vipers, bear fruit, and repent – or *fry!*" Well, which is it? What are we supposed to do? I strongly suspect that at least all of us that bother to show up to church on the Third Sunday of Advent want very badly to get ready for the Lord's coming. But how?

The truth lies in the nature of the good news, in the nature of the Gospel. It is always important to remember that the Gospel, if it truly *is* the gospel, is *always* a two-edged sword. The Gospel always cuts both ways. The Gospel always simultaneously "comforts the afflicted" *and* "afflicts the comfortable."

The folks that came out to see John knew pretty much what they were in for. And they got it. He begins his address to the crowd in today's lesson by calling those who had come not out of sincerity, but to try and cover their backsides. They wanted his baptism as a some sort of warranty of their self-righteousness, an everlasting fire insurance policy that called for no premiums, no change of heart, and no real faith. These he addressed as a "brood of vipers," a bunch of sneaky snakes, looking to get by and get over.

But in that same crowd, there were those who genuinely wanted to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, and came asking John, "What then should we do?"

Some had plenty of material possessions. To these John said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none." In a world where millions of us have whole *closets* full of clothes, millions more will freeze this winter. "Whoever has food must do likewise," John said to others. While one of the biggest health problem in our nation (and, truth be known, in many of *our* households as well) is all-too-conspicuous consumption, millions, *billions* are hungry this very moment. Others in the crowd along the Jordan were tax collectors. "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you," John told these. In a world where most do their work for a fair return, there *are* those who would take whatever advantage they

can, at whatever cost. And there are those that because of their status, or their background, or the color of their skin, are forced to *pay* that cost.

When you think about it, nothing much has changed in the last 2,000 years, has it? Some of us can slide into believing that religion is a game to be played with skill, and that grace comes cheap. This Advent, some of us need to do the type of preparation for which John was calling. Some us need to get off our backsides and onto our knees, to prayerfully examine where repentance is still needed. And then some us need to get back up off our knees and get busy doing what we can to set things right. The ax that John spoke of, we may need to remember, is *still* laying at the roots, and the Gospel edge on it is still as sharp as *ever*.

But our text from Philippians is the *other* edge of the Gospel sword, and it is *just* as sharp. *Paul* speaks to those at the other end of the spectrum. These were fine, upstanding Christians, these Philippians. They were regular in giving. They were diligent in prayer. They were champions of community service. But for many of them, religion had become more a burden to bear, than a joy to share. Salvation had become a matter of self-justifying spiritual precision. Preparing for the Lord's coming had become a tedious, *grudging* task, a matter of dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's of this life, so they could to make to the next.

You see, Paul needed to remind *them* that, as important as it is, it's not *enough* to feed the hungry. It's not *enough* to clothe the naked. It's not *enough* to shelter the homeless. It's not *enough* to protect the oppressed. The other edge of the Gospel sword is that even if we do *all* those things, but we don't have the joy of the coming Lord burned deep within our hearts, we are simply missing the point of it all. If you're collecting tons of food for the hungry, and at the same time, grumbling about the lack of leadership and the failure of others, then you're missing the point! If you buy a gift to help a desperate family, to clothe the poorly clothed, to bring joy to a child, and then wrap it while biting your neighbor in the back, you're missing the point! If you write bigger and bigger checks to give to this or that or the other thing, and in your thoughts and in your words, you try to use your gift to control or to manipulate or to make whatever point you think you need to make, then you're missing the point!

As we take another step closer to the Christmas season, with its sometimes syrupy sentimentality and visions of sugarplum perfection, the mix of today's lessons challenges us to understand that the message of Advent points to a way of being that is well *beyond* all that surface glaze. It is *good* news, it is *Gospel*, that God's word is a two-edged sword that *cannot* be escaped.

We can and we *must* clothe the naked and feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. We can and we *must* take to task those we find adding weight to the load of those who can least bear the burden. We can and we *must* protect those who cannot protect themselves from the deadly aggression of others. But the message that Paul sent to the Philippians, the message that Advent sends to us anew here today, is that even in the midst of the pain and suffering of this world, in the name of Jesus Christ, in the *love* of Jesus Christ, we can and we *must*... rejoice! You see, the one who has come, the one who is continually breaking into each moment, the one who in the fullness of time will come again in the fullness of his glory, the *Lord* is near! *That's* the reason for our rejoicing. Not that everything is sugarplums and candy canes. But that the author of light and life is as near to us, as near to *you*, as your next breath.

"Whatever is true," Paul says, "whatever is honorable, whatever is just," *that's* the point. "Whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable," *that's* the point. "If there is anything that is excellent, anything worthy of praise," *that's* the point. These are the things that can be at the center of our thoughts. These are the things that should be at the center of our attention. These are the things that *must* be at the center of our every action. And when they are, when we give thanks to God for the many gifts with which he has blessed us, and blesses us still, and when we rely on him to meet our needs and those of the crippled world around us, then we will find God's greatest gift: "The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus."

I may not be ready to return to the sappy, "Don't worry, be happy!" I may never be. But this Advent, I pray that I will always, *always* be given the joy to help lead you in that little song from my childhood, "Rejoice, rejoice, again I say rejoice."