The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Third Sunday of Advent
Proper 10
Year C
RCL
Zephaniah 3:14-20 Canticle 9 Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:7-18

Going Toe to Toe with John the Baptist

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever.[1] Amen.

I thought that prayer was worth repeating. It has been a rough week and John the Baptist is not going to make it any easier for us and after much prayer and discernment, neither am I. Lord have mercy. A reading from the Gospel according to Jeanne+: 

In the fourth year of the Obama presidency, when Rick Snyder was Governor of Michigan, and John was mayor of Ann Arbor, and Randy Richardson was the Senate Majority Leader in Lansing representing the regions of Monroe County, the southern part of Washtenaw County, and part of Jackson County, during the high priesthood of the Christian “right”, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into the entire region around the Great Lakes, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
   'Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.
   Every valley shall be filled,
   and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
   and the crooked shall be made straight,
   and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

And John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! What are you doing here? Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Are you repentant or are you just afraid? If you are serious, then bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We are privileged Americans. We have the Founding Fathers as our ancestors and we are still throwing tea parties’; for truly I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to the Founding Fathers. 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.”

And what was left of the struggling middle class asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Then the wealthy CEOs and industrialists came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher what should we do?” He said to them, “Stop destroying the environment in your quest to make money, stop demonizing the unions, pay your workers in better proportion to your own earnings, and charge a
just price for your product.” Even the lawmakers, including the Governor, also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” John said to them, “Stop legislating in secret and in haste! Do not make private what has been public and call it education reform! Our children are not commodities and education is not a business! Furthermore, do not allow our houses of worship and our schools to be defiled with concealed weapons. And do not increase the chasm between the wealthy and the poor by destroying the working class in favor of big business. Remember that you represent all of the people and your laws must protect the most vulnerable in society, not hurt them.”

“Look” John continues, “I am baptizing you with water preparing you for the one who is to come after me. Make no mistake; he who is to come will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is standing at the ready to clean this State and to burn.”

And so it was, with this and many other exhortations (and swear words), John the Baptist proclaimed the good news to the people of Michigan.[2] Here ends the reading. And thanks be to God for that!

Welcome my brothers and sisters to the third Sunday of Advent. It is a Sunday that is quickly getting lost in the wilderness we call December. You see, in our attempt as good Christians to welcome the baby Jesus in earnest with presents and pastries, in our zeal to defend the unborn Christ Child against those who are supposedly declaring war on Christmas, in our well intentioned hustle and bustle, pageantry and parades, we have forgotten something huge. We have forgotten that before we are allowed to welcome the infant Jesus, before we can get a peek at the Holy Family, before we are even given the birth announcement sung by the heavenly hosts, we must first come toe to toe with John the Baptist. And John, as you have just heard, does not suffer fools gladly. And why should he? He knows the Truth. He recognized that his cousin Jesus was the Messiah before either of them was even born! Such discernment already from his mother’s womb! Just imagine what the man can do when he looks you in the eyes! “He’s gonna find out who’s naughty or nice!” That’s right, Santa has nothing on John the Baptist, the original life style accountability master.

No one wants to have such honesty gazing that deeply into them, especially this time of year, but look into our eyes and our souls John must. It is the only way we are able to prepare the way of the Lord. Encountering the voice crying out in the wilderness is the straightest path to Christmas. We will never be worthy of Christ’s coming until we have humbled ourselves to the degree that God did when God entered into this world as a helpless baby, born in the least likely of places to the least likely of people. Remember that Christ the King was a refugee born neither into nobility nor into stability. And it is that kind of humility that John demands of us all.

It is a strange tension we find ourselves in today: called to repent of our arrogance and our excess all whilst rejoicing. You see, the third Sunday of Advent is also Rejoice Sunday. We light the pink candle and we celebrate that we are almost there. The prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah in today’s readings point us toward hope. The worst is over; it is God who saves us. And just when we are feeling comforted and reassured the Gospel of Luke smacks us in the face and asks us, “Have you met John?” It is hard to reconcile the two experiences because we like to rejoice in the present—celebrating something that has just happened to us. Who can celebrate being a victim of recent events? And on the other end, who wants to celebrate being called a brood of vipers and being told we have to completely change the way we live or risk making the baby Jesus cry or worse—risk making him angry?
But that is the interesting thing about all of today’s readings, they are not about now, they are about tomorrow and the next day and the next. We can rejoice in the Lord always because we know what the Lord is capable of! If you take away nothing else from today, please hear this: We are not doomed to live in darkness. Evil does not ever get the last word. We need not fear or worry. We can plunge over fiscal cliffs; lame duck lawmakers can plot in secrecy as if there won’t be horrific consequences! Tragedies can happen, but this is not the end! Rejoice! Zephaniah tells us that God will deal with all oppressors, the lame will be saved and the outcasts gathered in. So again I say Rejoice!

And this is John’s message too; his is not a contrary message even though his language is harsh. He is simply stirring us up to recognize what the privileged often miss because we are so busy protecting the present and elevating the past to a state of idolatry. John is opening us up to our future—a future of justice and righteousness and peace. He is preparing the way of the Lord, the coming of the Christ, the Kingdom of God on Earth! Rejoice! This is good news! But this future of ours is not a passive one. John warns us that it is not a future we can coast in on based on our ancestry, our right to bear arms, our wealth, or even our personal piety.

“So then Baptist,” we ask nervously as we light the third candle knowing there is only one more left, “what must we do?” “It is simple, Christian.” John answers, “I will say to you what I have said to everyone before you: live in partnership with God and one another. Possess no more than you need so that you are free to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and work for justice. In other words, live into your Baptismal Covenant. There is no time to waste! Rejoice! The Lord is near.” Thanks be to God.

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