

3rd Sunday of Advent, Year C
December 13, 2015
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

[Click here to read scripture passages for this Sunday.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I thought that would be a nicer way to start my sermon than how John the Baptist began his. He stood before a huge crowd, that had traveled out into the wilderness to hear him, and rather than greeting them warmly with words of grace and peace, or saying a prayer, John opened with “you brood of vipers.” If I heard a greeting like that, I think I’d be tempted to respond with our common worship response “and also with you.”

John was a little extreme.

He was the last in a long line of prophets who told God’s people to repent and to bear fruit worthy of that repentance. He called them out of complacency, out of claiming “well, we’re children of Abraham, God’s chosen people,” so we’re fine. “No,” John said, “you’re not fine, everything is not fine and God is going to bring serious change. God is going to do some major purifying so that what is evil will be removed.”

John spoke this message to God’s people before Jesus arrived on the scene the first time. Now as we prepare for him to come again, they are words we need to hear as well.

When we’re tempted to complacency and ease as we prepare for Christmas; when we’re tempted to think “well, we’re God’s children and we should only be greeted with words of grace and peace;” John’s words make it clear that we need a wake-up call - all is not well within us and in our world.

Of course, lately we hardly need a reminder that our world is not well - there are nearly constant reminders of this in the news. But how are things within each of us?

It is so easy to blame others for the problems around us - to point to bigots, fanatics, terrorists, politicians, the media. Yet within each of us there are also anger and hatred, indifference, prejudice and fear. These things can grow like weeds that prevent us from bearing good fruit. And, we don’t deal well with these weeds.

- Sometimes we ignore them;

- sometimes we attack them with a vengeance that tears up the fruit along with the weeds;
- sometimes we just throw up our hands in despair as the weeds overwhelm and paralyze us.

We are in desperate need of God to come and deal with all the evil within each of us.

We need God to bring an ax to the weeds that have become as tall as trees within us.

We need God to separate the wheat from the chaff within us and then burn away the chaff.

This is what John says God will do in Jesus and what God will do at the end of time. It is what we need, but it is also a bit frightening. All the promised cutting and burning sounds rather intense, rather extreme. This imagery combined with all the frightening news these days is just a little much, especially so close to Christmas.

It seems those first crowds to hear John the Baptist were also frightened by his language about God's judgment. "What then should we do?" they asked. And, John's answer is a bit surprising. In the midst of his extreme rhetoric, John gives simple direct, answers.

- He tells the crowds - share, be kind.
- He tells the tax collectors - be fair.
- And he tells the soldiers - don't bully, be satisfied with what you have.

Share, be kind, don't bully, you have enough. It sounds like what we learn in kindergarten.

Given that John was a radical prophet in the wilderness who wore camel skin and ate locusts and wild honey; and given his extreme preaching, many probably expected his instructions to be more radical. You'd expect something like "Give away all your clothes. You don't need coats; you can wear a camel skin like me." Instead he said, "If you have 2 coats, give one away and share your food."

Given who John was, many in the crowd were probably shocked that John was even speaking to the tax collectors and soldiers. They were corroborating with the oppressive Roman Empire and were preying on their own people. Weren't they just the kind of weeds and chaff that God would burn away? How could he think they were worthy of his energies and ethical instruction? And if he did turn to address those scum working for Rome, you'd think he'd say something like "renounce everything Roman, become pacifists and live in the wilderness with me."

Yet he didn't tell them to stop being tax collectors, to stop being soldiers. He simply told them to not charge too much, not extort, and be satisfied with what they earned.

What then can we do? Be kind, be fair, don't bully, treat people well, be content. This is not extreme, heroic stuff. It is stuff that each of us can do, whatever our life situation. We can, and we do these kinds of things all the time.

These simple actions may not seem like much, but John's answer to the fearful crowd is a powerful message for us in fearful times.

- When we get overwhelmed by the evil within and around us, we can share a coat.
- When so many voices tell us to be afraid, we can share food.
- When we're tempted to judge others, to say that people with certain beliefs or certain political convictions are chaff and need to be burned away, we're reminded to treat others well, to not bully others.
- When we wonder how we can make a difference, we're reminded we don't have to take extreme measures. We can share and be kind in our daily life, no matter our job or life situation.

These actions John prescribes for us sound simple but they can have a profound impact on us. They give us something to do to resist the power of fear; they open us up to other people. As we're opened up, light gets in to help more fruit grow within us.

We're also brought into relationships with other people and it is in relationships with others that we have to deal with our anger, bigotry and indifference. As that happens, God can work in us to cut out and burn away the weeds and the chaff. It may take awhile, but It can and does happen.

These simple actions also help us take small but important steps to join in God's work of justice and righteousness. The many small steps we take this time of year and throughout the year are important ways that we participate in what God is doing to purify, restore and heal us and the world

This is not to say that these small actions bring in God's kingdom or that we should be complacent thinking we can do a few more random acts of kindness and everything will be good. Rather, as we look for God to come and bring in the kingdom, these actions provide a way for God to work for us and through us.

This Advent and this Christmas may we join in simple acts of service and love, and may we know God's purifying, renewing presence with us and with our world.

Thanks be to God.