

Third Sunday of Advent – Year C – December 13, 2015
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“Stir up your power, O Lord”
...with hope even when our worst fears have been realized

On this Third Sunday of Advent where we pray in our Collect, “Stir up your power, O Lord...” we’re reminded not only to start stirring up the Christmas pudding, but to let our whole being be stirred so that we can encounter the living Christ in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. After all, the theme for this Third Sunday in Advent is to be excited, to be stirred up in joy and expectancy! In our first reading, Zephaniah invites us to “Rejoice and exult with all your heart...” And in our second reading, St. Paul calls us to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” These are all very fitting for this Sunday, traditionally known not only as “Stir up Sunday”ⁱ but as “Gaudete” Sunday, from the Latin for “rejoice,” and symbolized by the pink candle in our Advent wreath.

In these middle two Sundays of Advent, last week and today, things don’t get any quieter than our apocalyptic passages from the first Sunday of Advent. John the Baptist thunders onto the stage of salvation history with all the tact of a fire-breathing dragon. If the earth doesn’t shake at his message, the people who turn out for his baptism of repentance sure do. Right out of the gate, John says that the Kingdom of God and God’s Messiah were coming, all right, but if you thought it was going to be like a cozy Christmas party you’d better think again. You bunch of snakes, you’d better shape up. And don’t think your ancestry and religious affiliation and the privilege and prestige that go with that will get you any more points than those stones over there, John yells. So you need to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it does, John insists—and get baptized, which for John was a public sign that you were serious about the process of cleaning up your life. No one ever accused John the Baptist of being the life of the party. But if he wasn’t fun, he sure was important. So here he is again in our Advent pathway toward Jesus, this snarling watch dog, this Baptizer named John and he is right in our face, so we’d better deal with him and what he is saying to us.ⁱⁱ

John's call to repentance should be seen for what it is: an invitation—albeit a harshly worded invitation—to relationship with the Holy One coming into our midst, the Holy One who wants us to be able to love with all our being in thought, word and deed—with “gladness and singleness of heart” as one of our prayers puts it.ⁱⁱⁱ When we respond to this invitation in a joyful spirit, we may help contribute not only to a transformed world but to our own liberation.^{iv} That, indeed, is call for exuberant rejoicing. It’s important to note that whenever God is presented in the Bible as coming in judgment; that is a reference to liberation. Today’s first reading is a wonderful example of that. The judgment of God does not mean that God sits and judges, as on a royal throne. Judgment in the Bible means that God helps the perplexed find their purpose, and the poor and downtrodden reclaim their dignity, gain their rights and liberate them from oppression. Therefore the notion of God as a judge should be a joyful one.^v This is the rejoicing referred to in this Third Sunday of Advent. And, next week, we will hear such rejoicing in the pregnant Mary’s song, the

Magnificat, rejoicing in God who would show strength with his arm and scatter the proud in their conceit; that would cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly; and who would fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. Our passages today from Zephaniah and Philippians are brimming with invitations to rejoice in the God who brings wholeness and justice. Whether we benefit from, or are hurt by, the injustices of this world, determines in part whether or not we see all this with a joyful frame of mind. Perspective - that's what these passages are really about. And so we have the ironic juxtaposition in our gospel of axes being laid to the roots of trees, a winnowing hook clearing the threshing floor, and chaff being burned with unquenchable fire; followed by the statement "So, with many other exhortations, John preached *good news* to the people." Good news, indeed! Cause for joy and celebration—for some, yes. It depended on where you were sitting. And it still does.^{vi}

Today we hear John explain his message of judgment and denunciation, and his call to repentance and preparation. How are we to prepare, to welcome the Messiah of God into all of our life?^{vii} John calls the people to grapple with very practical, even mundane, everyday questions about getting ready. So, when asked "What then should we do?" John calls on the people to share more with one another and to give of their own resources to help others in need. And he calls us, along with the tax collectors and soldiers in the gospel, to do an honest day's work, to be fair to others, to respect their rights and honor their human dignity. There's a lot in the Bible that's hard to understand, but John's practical exhortations for personal and societal change are very plain and simple and doable. To get ready for the fulfillment of God's promise and presence, John calls us to modify our behavior, and thus open our hearts, with achievable and specific deeds of caring and justice in our everyday lives. For that is where God's presence is manifested; that's where Jesus makes a home in you—that's the Spirit of Christmas. John challenges us to be active participants in the new world order that the coming of Jesus Christ initiates.

But what about that harsh tone of his? Well, John did not tolerate the intolerable. What John the Baptist and all true prophets teach is that love and anger work in harness and that anger directed appropriately can stir up and renew bonds of love, like any good lover's quarrel. John's love of God—his passion for God's purposes of wholeness and justice—burned in him so deeply and brilliantly and hot that on more than one occasion he rose up angry. John the Baptist had a lover's quarrel, directing his anger at all that was separating people from God's presence and purpose in their lives. Yes, John did use some awful images—of vipers, wrath, wielding axes, pruning dead limbs, sweeping away chaff, and fire. But, he believed God's purpose was not to harm or destroy; rather God's purpose is always to clear the way for new fruit, new grain, and new life. The anger in this prophetic tradition is an anger that loves the good and so has to hate the evil, while understanding, as St. Augustine put it, that you should "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself."^{viii} Remember, this prophetic anger is rooted in loving compassion for all whose human dignity has been diminished, trampled upon or snuffed out. It's a just anger, a holy indignation that ignites into action and fires up people to change the way they think and act.^{ix} Finally, John's anger, fueled by his passion for God and his compassion for others, was also rooted in hope; and hope is

what God empowers us with even when our worst fears have been realized. Listen to how St. Augustine wrote of hope:

“Of the three virtues of faith, hope and love, hope is the greatest. Faith only tells us that God is. Love only tells us that God is good. But hope tells us that God will work God's will. [And] Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.”^x

Keep hope alive! Amen.

ⁱ “Stir up Sunday” was originally the Sunday just before the Advent season, although the original collects for that Sunday and all four Sundays in Advent began with “Stir up...”

ⁱⁱ What *is* John the Baptist doing here? His preaching is brutally honest and very unsettling—certainly stirring up his hearers: You brood of vipers. You want to be baptized just to try to escape judgment without truly turning to God? First go and prove by the way you live that you really have repented. Your blood line or church membership or social class won't save you. “What then should we do?” the crowd asks. John responds that if you have two coats, give one to the poor. If you have food, give to those who are hungry. It is a challenge to his listeners, and to us. John's message of repentance is not just saying “I'm sorry”, nor is it merely changing our heads or even our hearts. Gospel repentance also involves *changing our behavior* in our lives and in our society. Now many people may have likely seen John's call to a transformed life as an indictment, and his mandate for treating the poor justly as, at best, an unpleasant chore.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 365.

^{iv} As a former colleague, Mary Haddad, put it,

“Complete are we when we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God. The compassionate heart is not enough if the outward life is passive. An active life with the wrong heart is, likewise, not enough. Complete are we when our inner life is coherent with our outward life. Complete are we when what we say is what we do. Complete are we when walking with God means not walking alone but walking with [others, especially] those who are different from us.” (Mary E. Haddad, “Complete are you...” (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church – sermon preached January 30, 2005)).

^v People on the margins welcome such a God. See also Joyce Hollyday, “Receive the Mystery” in *Sojourners* (Washington D.C.: December 1994-January 1995), Dec. 11 entry; Jim Rice, “Into Our Midst” in *Sojourners* (Washington D.C.: November-December 1997), Dec. 14 entry; and Martin L. Smith, “The Practicalities of repentance” in *Sojourners* (Washington D.C.: December 2012), Dec. 16 entry.

^{vi} So, today we encounter John the Baptist, and he is right in our face. John is a figure whom we meet up with each year in these middle two weeks of Advent and this is no accident. It is a way of telling us that, no matter where we sit, we all need to wake up, pay attention and prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and in the world, and point out the presence and purpose of Christ today, as John the Baptist did long ago. The sixth century BC prophet Isaiah's words of consolation (Isaiah 40:3-4), envision a way in the wilderness as the *geographic* route which his fellow Judeans would travel home after their exile in Babylon. John, on the other hand, called his contemporaries nearly six hundred years later to prepare the way of the Lord and make a right pathway to God—*first in their own hearts*. Prepare the way of the Lord and make a straight—a right—pathway through the windings of sin and the rough ways of selfishness and fear, through the mountains and hills of arrogance, and the valleys of discouragement and despair—so that God can make a home in our hearts. John's message of conversion calls for a reordering of personal and societal priorities with the understanding that we all share a common humanity and common longings as children of God.

^{vii} John's predictions of the judgment that comes like an ax to a tree, or as a separation of the wheat from the chaff, does not just throw his listeners back onto themselves, writhing in remorse, dumfounded by despair or buried in introspection; for inside his message, John not only *denounces*, but also *announces* that the Reign of God, the liberation of our hearts and our world is already in process, is already being established, and that it needs to take shape in our lives and in our society through concrete modifications of actual behavior. As John says, we are to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." John leaves his listeners enough room to realize that they can make some quite doable, practical changes, and without delay.

^{viii} Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, A Passion For the Possible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 22.

^{ix} John's quarrel with the world was deep down a lover's quarrel not a hater's quarrel. Today we need such a countervailing anger, focused and grounded in loving compassion and hope. We can only say yes to God in Christ coming into our midst by also being able to say a focused no to evil, fear, ignorance and injustice in our hearts and in the wider world. Only then can we prepare the way of the Lord instead of preventing or getting in the way. Our two main Biblical companions in the Advent journey are John the Baptist and his denunciations, which go hand-in-hand with Mary and her annunciation. Advent calls us to prepare for the act of God that strikes down falsehood, selfishness, hopelessness—even death—in the coming of Jesus Christ. And we know that God is angry. After all, it's God's world, and God has a right to be angry. But we are also told by Jesus to not be afraid; for we know that the One who comes to judge us and our world is the One who loves us most of all. So as we prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and world, let us await the coming of the One who as promised by John, will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that fire from heaven which is not a punishing fire of destruction nor damnation, but rather a refining, cleansing fire which alone sears through cold hearts and can warm, enlighten and purify our lives and this good earth.

^x Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy, (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1988), p. 136.