

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 12, 2015
Year C, RCL

E. Bevan Stanley

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

From the Epistle: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first reading begins, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ... The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst.” Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice...The Lord is near.” This is the message of Advent. Our Lord is near. Whether we see him or not, whether we hear him or not, whether we feel him or not, Jesus is near. Our Lord is in our midst. We can forget this in the midst of all the busyness of this season. It is odd that in hurrying about buying presents, preparing food, going to parties, welcoming family, oh yeah, and then there is church—and all to celebrate the arrival of our Lord Jesus—that we can find little opportunity to stop and listen, look, and sense our Lord’s presence with us.

Then comes the Gospel with John’s thundering voice crying in the wilderness, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” This is great entertainment. We love to watch somebody telling off the bad guys. We will walk all the way from Jerusalem to the Jordan to see this show. Then the crowd asks John, “What then should we do?” Uh-oh, the crowd, that is we. Could we be part of the brood of vipers? In what ways are we snakes? When we are threatened, we strike. When the truth is embarrassing, we get sneaky. Sometimes we convince ourselves that crawling on our bellies is wiser than walking tall. Sometimes we speak with forked tongues. Sometimes we are poison to those around us.

So taken together the message of these readings is: “Rejoice! God is among you, you brood of vipers.” This is the Gospel, isn’t it? God is with us even when we know we do not deserve it. God is on our side, even when we are not. As Paul writes in Romans, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”¹

So how do we prepare for the coming of our Lord? First, by going out to see John the Baptist. We need to leave Jerusalem and go down to the Jordan. We need to break free for a day, an hour, a couple of minutes from our usual round of chores, duties, and tasks. We need to go somewhere and listen to a prophet, to hear the word of the Lord. It may be a speaker, or a musician. Perhaps a movie or play will touch our hearts. Or maybe we need to read some poetry or the Bible. Or simply be with some people whose conversation will wake us up in some way or challenge us. We need the cold water in our face, something that will cause us to sit up and take notice. “You brood of vipers!”

Then we need to acknowledge that something in what we have heard or seen or felt has a claim on us. We need to respond. We need to ask, as the crowd did, “What must I do?” It may not be earth shattering. I need to call my friend on the west coast who has cancer. I need to send a card to my aunt who lost her husband this year. I need to get on the treadmill. I need to read my Bible. I need to pray. And yet such small things may be world changing. They may change your world or the world of those you love.

Or we may hear a call to attend to making our common life more like the kingdom of heaven. Tomorrow is the third anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook, and the amount of gun violence has not abated. Our bishops note that “according to the Washington Post, the shooting in San Bernardino is the 355th mass shooting in the United States this year.” That is more than one a day. In addition, every year over 30,000 Americans are killed by gun violence, close to

¹ Romans 5:8

60% of these victims at their own hands. Our bishops are calling on us to get involved in efforts to make our nation less violent, our society less dangerous. Tomorrow we will toll our bell 26 times in memory of our neighbors who were killed at Sandy Hook three years ago.

We also need to be looking for our Lord in our midst. What signs are there of God's presence? A smile. A generous act. St. Irenaeus says that "the glory of God is the human person fully alive." I have seen God present in this congregation in the grace you have shown in meeting one another in the capital campaign visits. God is present in the courage some of you have shown in your giving. God is present whenever we speak the truth to each other, and when that truth is heard. Sometimes we need to hear a hard truth about ourselves. Sometimes we have a hard time hearing a kind word, or a compliment. Either way, truly hearing can be a sign of God's presence. Simply being awake is important. In several parables Jesus teaches the importance of staying awake and of watching. As Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot just by watching." I find that the two minutes it takes me to walk from the rectory to the church can be a very important time. If I look around, breathe deeply, observe the sky, feel the air on my face, and look at the birds, the day is suddenly very rich and full of promise and life. If I don't, well I can miss a lot, and I will not be very present with those whom I will encounter that day.

And God loves us. That truth is so often stated, that I forget that it is true. Perhaps this more graphic way of putting it will help: If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. This is important. It means that we do not have to change for God to love us. We do not have to do anything to make God love us. God loves us now, as we are. When we experience that love, then we change.

Looking for God changes us. We become more and more like that for which we search. And since in fact God is in our midst, God is working on us, nudging us, wooing us, inviting,

prodding, guiding. We are not usually told where we are going. We are asked to take the next step. And the next. Each time trusting God to guide us and protect us and make our choices bear good fruit. Nor can we usually see the changes that God is making in us until long after the fact.

Richard Wilbur wrote a poem about an inch worm called “The Measuring Worm:”

This yellow striped green
Caterpillar, climbing up
The steep window screen,

Constantly (for lack
Of a full set of legs) keeps
Humping up his back.

It’s as if he sent
By a sort of semaphore
Dark omegas meant

To warn of Last Things.
Although he doesn’t know it,
He will soon have wings,

And I, too, don’t know
Toward what undreamt condition
Inch by inch I go.

We don’t know where we are going when we leave John the Baptist at the Jordan. We do not know toward what undreamt condition we are inching. We do know that God is giving us the gifts we need to change the world, to help build the Kingdom. God gives us love, patience, imagination, and power. We look for God’s presence and then one day, we feel the brush of angels’ wings, or see divinity in a stable, or hear the voice say, “Fear not. I bring you tidings of great joy.” Rejoice always, and again I say rejoice, you dear, beloved brood of vipers.