

FOCUS: The Good News is we are made righteous through the saving acts of God (Third in a series)

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our journey through Advent continues, and we are nearing the end of Advent already, even as we are scrambling to prepare ourselves for the next season of the church year—Christmas. All of this fits into God’s plan of salvation, even if we don’t think so. Our lessons this morning begin to focus in on God’s plan and how it is to come into fruition. We also hear more from John the Baptist on how we are to act and respond. All in all, an interesting place to continue our journey.

The words of the prophet Zephaniah were written early in the reign of Josiah, sometime after 630 BC. The call to “sing aloud” implies that this passage was written sometime after the restoration of the Chosen People into Jerusalem, an assumption that is supported by the term of endearment, “daughter Zion.” The enemies of the people have been defeated, and the people are called to rejoice and give thanks to God. Furthermore, God is present with his people, and since he is with them, Zion has nothing to fear, and in fact can live in the comfort of God having commuted the sentence of his wrath upon them. With God present among his people, there is nothing for his people to fear.

In the Old Testament, the promise of a messiah is a sign of assurance to the people that God still reigns over them. And not only is God with his people and turned away their enemies, God has also taken away all judgment upon them. God is present with them as a warrior who will “renew [the people] in his love.”¹ The prophet announces this just after telling the people to have no fear, a statement that typically precedes some assurance or guarantee of God’s presence in order to save his people. The image of a loving warrior is a pretty strong contrast, yet it describes God so well. Also, throughout the Old Testament there is a strong connection behind the idea that to be victorious is to provide salvation. God is with his people. The people have been saved and made righteous by a victorious protector and savior. These are times for joy and singing and rejoicing, and not times for fear.

We need to hear this call for rejoicing and singing because we, too, are in the presence of God and we await the day of our salvation when the Lord will gather together all of his people. And, we are to rejoice because of what has been done for us—the convicted sinners of God’s own creation. God erases all recollection of our sins. Isn’t that just *scandalous*?

¹ Zeph 3:17 (NRSV)

Then, we heard the words of the prophet Isaiah, who proclaims his trust in God who is strong and mighty and provides for the prophet's own salvation. The people are called to rejoice and call on the name of the Lord and sing praises because the Lord God is in their midst. Once again, we hear the prophets of the *Old Testament* calling us to rejoice in the presence and the promise of the Holy One. In his lectures on Isaiah, our beloved Martin Luther offers us these words, “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion’ [calls us to] sing with jubilation and exultation,” and that Zion, “that is, the church, rejoice, because [we] already have the forgiveness of sins, peace, and will not be forsaken. Therefore, you have enough reason for rejoicing.”²

But, let's not overlook what Paul has for us as well. Paul calls on the Philippians to rejoice and not to worry about anything. Go to God with your prayers and supplications, the Philippians are told. Don't hold anything back. And while you do that, do so in the knowledge that it is the peace of God, a peace that is greater and broader than anything we humans can imagine or understand, will guard and guide you. These are powerful words, dear sisters and brothers. We need to heed them and, more importantly, to *believe* them.

But in the midst of off this joy and celebration, we suddenly have a huge bucket of ice water dumped upon us by our old friend, John the Baptist. Here are folks coming to do exactly what John was calling them to do—be baptized for the repentance of their sins—and he greets them with the soothing and comforting words, “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*”

Obviously, the lectionary designers had a sense of humor putting these familiar words of John the Baptist with all the other texts about rejoicing and celebrating. John's welcome to those who have come to be baptized isn't what one would describe as “joyful.” Yet, these are the words we hear on this Third Sunday in Advent. What should we make of them in light of the words of joy and praise we have also heard?

This is all part of God's plan of salvation for his people. John the Baptist is a straight-shooter with the people. He doesn't take much grief from people, and he knows he is on a very specific mission—to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. He wants the people to be ready, and he cautions his listeners from resting on their reputations. When John says, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’” he is telling the people gathered around him not to rest solely on the fact they are part of God's Chosen People. Rather, they need to look at themselves with great care and come for a baptism of repentance with true repentance on their hearts. Today, were John the Baptist standing before *us*, he might say,

² LW 16. Libronix Digital Library System edition.

“Don’t say to yourselves, ‘We’ve never done it that way before,’ or ‘My family has belonged to this church for decades.’ Just because we are here doesn’t mean we have the blanket right to do what we please as we await the coming of the Messiah. Rather, *because* we are saved—made righteous before God—does not mean that we don’t have to be honest and forthright in our repentance for our sins or that we shouldn’t be doing good works or that we shouldn’t be cheating our fellow brothers and sisters in the course of doing our work. That is simply not how we have been called to be.

Baptized children of God, you are called to be different than those in the rest of the world. Not better, not more important, but *different*. The question of the tax collectors and soldiers is the same question each of you should be asking. “What should we who are students do?” “What should we who are retired do?” “What should we who are working two jobs do?” I’m sure you get the point.

You are to do what you have been called to do in your baptism. To share the Good News of Christ Jesus with the world. To learn what God has in store for you and all of his creation. To share the joy of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. To sing praises and rejoice and shout for joy for the victory of death and the devil that comes to us through Christ Jesus as part of God’s plan of salvation for us.

And, my dear sisters and brothers, let me be so bold to say that we should come together as sisters and brothers in Christ, joined together in community, in this place next Sunday morning to hear where God’s plan of salvation takes us next. Thanks be to God.