

Sermon preached at Trinity Memorial Church, Philadelphia; by the Rev. Edward G. Rice, Priest-In-Charge; December 13, 2009; 3rd Advent Year C; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Last week I said that I find John the Baptist not very helpful in preparing for Christmas!

Now that statement, like many in interesting preaching, was a bit of an exaggeration. One of the most helpful things I ever heard about preaching was a statement by John Westerhoof. He said that “the truth is boring because it is so nuanced and takes at least three hours to unfold. Interesting preaching,” he went on to say, “is always heretical. Heresy not in being untrue but the truth pushed to its logical extreme. Just like in good storytelling it never rains—it always pours cats and dogs. Similarly, in good preaching, one needs to overstate the case. Hopefully, folks come back the next week and hear the counter-balance and, therefore, over time, get a sense of the truth.”

So this week, there are several things that I do find helpful about John the Baptist.

1. He gets people’s attention. John is like the proverbial 2 x 4 alongside the head.

During times when our prosperity has gotten the best of us, during our times of hubris and our more gilded ages when we are full of ourselves, almost totally neglectful of the needs of others—at those moments John the Baptist is great at getting our attention and cutting us down to size, helping get us in touch with reality.

I don’t sense that we need that this year.

#2. What I like about John the Baptist is that, if one pays attention to how he starts, his message is about the love of God. Among his first words is that quotation from Isaiah, “all people will see the salvation of God.”

#3. What I dislike is that, even though his words start with the mercy and love of God, it always feels like God is angry and vengeful—making a list and checking it twice and getting ready not only to give me a piece of coal as my reward but light it up to burn away my impurities. Makes me feel like I want to run away rather than turn and change.

#4. What I like about John is that he is present and specific. When the folks that are not chased away by his craziness and anger ask, "What must we do?" he is present enough, has paid attention enough, to know that he should not generalize. To the prosperous he says, "those who have two coats must share with anyone who has none." To tax collectors, he says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To soldiers, he says, "do not use your power to exploit or abuse others."

Each of us is different, and John, like any good preacher and pastor, has taken time to know the folks he is related to and calls each to the appropriate task. Faith is not about vast generalities like "believe, have hope, be positive." It is about doing the just and loving thing at the right time in a particular way.

#5. And the other thing I like about John for our time and space, is that winnowing fork of his. The winnowing fork was used to throw the grain up in the air so the wind could blow away the husks, the shell, the chaff, while the kernel, the nutritious part of the grain, fell back to the floor where it could be scooped up and saved.

What I like about John is that he said there is a *difference* between right and wrong, between what is fair and unfair, between what is just and unjust, between greed and destructive selfishness and overflowing generosity. And boy, do we need that in our day.

Did you see the report earlier this week amidst all the reports about Tiger's affairs and newly revealed Ponzi schemes, that John Giles, the special agent in charge of the FBI division in Miami, Florida, said that "Corruption threatens the 'soul and fabric' of our society." He pointed to the transgression of the supposed role models in our society, the greed and corruption in the financial community and among public officials, and the crimes related to this behavior which have risen from 20-25% in recent years.

Yes, I think we need someone shouting that there is a difference between right and wrong because being unclear about that threatens not only our souls and relationships but the very fabric and future of our society and country.

But, and it may seem strange to hear me say this after all those words, the focus of our awareness today needs not to be on John the Baptist and his helpful and not-so-helpful message but on the words of Zephaniah and St. Paul.

Traditionally this Sunday is known as “Gaudete Sunday,” “Rejoice Sunday,” because it was a respite amidst the talk of the end of the world and human “fall-shortenedness” to the Good News of God’s promises, the Good News of God’s love for us, the abundance of God’s Grace even in the midst of a troubled world.

Neither of those two passages is about cheap or easy Grace. Of the nine sections in Zephaniah’s short book, eight of them are burning denunciations of the corruption of the religious and political establishment which the prophet predicts will bring about the destruction of the nation. Only this short section is about God’s ability to bring renewal and salvation, blessings and new life, hope for the future in the midst of human frailty.

In the section of Philippians which we read, St. Paul is in prison, yet still finds the faith and hope to celebrate and find joy, the ability to give thanks, not for, but in all things.

These are not, “be happy, don’t worry” statements reminiscent of the song by that title of several years ago. They are about coming-through-it-all statements, which look for the light at the end of the tunnel and trust in God, not in ourselves, to create it and bring us through to it.

I want to end with a few examples of how Advent can teach us to live into the rejoicing held up on this day.

Three years ago I read a wonderful book entitled, *We Are All The Same*, about a twelve-year-old Zulu boy in South Africa who, before he died of the disease, spoke before the UN International Conference on AIDS. It is a beautifully written, compelling story and I gave copies of the book to both my mother and daughter for Christmas.

The author, Jim Wooten, a veteran ABC News reporter, begins the book with a few sentences that should be required reading for any religious pilgrim who wants to experience the hope and joy which are the promise of the Season of Advent and the essence of this Sunday. Jim writes:

The secret of journalism is that its practitioners are paid to live lives of sweet expectation. Even the most indolent members of our tribe come to understand that on any given day, sheer amazement could be waiting. In fact, over the years of my career, I have always been astonished not to be astonished.

This Sunday encourages us not to be blind to the difficulty around us but to continually look for the promise, joy, and actions of renewal that God is bringing about—to live lives of “sweet expectation.”

The other example is about a particular curve in the road between where my mother and brother live, a treacherous curve on Route 9 just outside of Brattleboro, Vermont. My brother is a constable and part of the rescue team in the local fire department and has been called repeatedly to assist with accidents on that treacherous curve. My sister-in-law worked for many years in the emergency room in Brattleboro Hospital treating victims from those accidents. Until it was finally totally re-engineered several years ago, that curve was treacherous. That’s the bad news.

The Good News is that my sister-in-law and brother would not shut up about the danger of that curve. Any time we visited over the last 35 years, they warned us to take the back roads and avoid that treacherous curve. The Good News is that not only they but their neighbors kept lobbying the state to re-engineer that curve. The Good News is that the family that lived closest to that curve kept a supply of blankets close to their front door so that they could rush out and cover the victims of those accidents, protecting them from the frigid cold and potential for shock setting in until the rescue and medical folks arrived.

The hard news is that our lives, this world, is filled with many treacherous curves, the Good News is that our God wants to and will eventually straighten out those curves, raise up those low spots, level out the valleys, and that many of God’s good people are there to help us until that day comes. Advent encourages us to be among those looking for and pointing out that Good News and joining God in bringing it to pass. In the Name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.