

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

10 And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 11 In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13 He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14 Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but

one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

### Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

### FEAR AND JOY

This is the third Sunday of Advent. Soon it will be Christmas. The Lord is near.

That’s the message of the season. The Lord is near. The Creator has come close to His creation.

That's a reason to rejoice, right? After all this is the Sunday when we light the candle of joy. We can leave our anxiety behind. We can say it again with the Apostle. Rejoice in the Lord always.

And yet, the joy of the Lord is not exactly what we expected. The coming of God's Messiah brings both fear and joy.

In Matthew's gospel when the women saw the risen Jesus they went to tell the other disciples with "fear and great joy."

I think this was typical of those who encountered Jesus. Fear and great joy lived side by side. The presence of Jesus gave the disciples great joy, but there was also an element of fear when the Lord was near.

When the angels told the shepherds the good news of great joy it was in the context of great fear. The angels told them not to be afraid.

But, how could they not be afraid?

If I saw the heavenly host I would be afraid. When God comes near there is always fear and great joy.

Why is our joy still mixed with fear? Maybe it's because the God who comes in Jesus is not the God that we expect or maybe even the God we want.

In the Old Testament God is one who is "hid in thick darkness." If you want to get close to God, you have to get out of the valley. You have to climb a high mountain.

And maybe in that misty and mysterious place you might get just of glimpse of the Almighty.

But, even a glimpse was more than the people could bear. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Thou art a God who hides thyself." And God hid himself out of mercy. No one could see God and live.

Do you remember when Moses comes close to seeing God on Mt. Sinai? He is terrified. Nobody has seen God.

In fact even the reflected glory of God is too much for men and women to bear. The demands of a righteous and just God are overwhelming.

And yet when Jesus comes, this hidden God comes near. The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come. On our own we can't reach God...even on the highest mountain. And so God comes to us.

That's a reason to rejoice. But, that's also a reason to be afraid.

John the Baptist knew that. That's why in our gospel lesson for today John is back warning the people in no uncertain terms to get ready.

They need to repent of their sins. They need to get washed up. The Messiah is coming. The Lord is near.

And if this idea that the Lord is near doesn't cause you to be filled with fear, you haven't really heard the message.

## LISTENING TO JESUS

The Lord is near. God is no longer at a safe distance. God has come close, too close for comfort.

You see the God revealed in Jesus is too easy to understand. His message is too plain.

The God who is high and lifted up is easy to ignore. Like the song says, God is just watching from a distance...if indeed God is there at all.

But, when God comes near, that is a reason to be afraid. There will be no more business as usual.

We will have to change. Instead of listening to our own voice and calling it God we will have to listen to the voice of Jesus.

Remember when Jesus and Peter, James and John went up the mountain, and Jesus was transfigured before them. That was in some sense a Christmas story. This was another way of saying that God was in Jesus.

Now that revelation alone did not overwhelm the disciples and bring them to their knees. In fact Peter even wanted to stay on the mountaintop forever.

But, then the cloud of God's presence overshadowed the disciples and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

That's when the disciples fell face down on the ground. That's when they became afraid. They

wanted Jesus in all his glory. They just didn't want to listen to what he actually said!

And the same is often true of us.

It's not enough to just think sweet thoughts about God and the precious baby Jesus during Advent. We have to listen to the Lord who comes near.

The joy of heaven comes with a demand. And if we are determined to do things our way instead of God's way, if we want to keep God at a distance, then we are in for a rude awakening.

In Jesus heaven comes down, and that shakes things up. The joy of heaven will not be satisfied with business as usual. God loves us too much to leave us alone.

So what is this demand that the joy of heaven makes?

It is the demand to treat others with compassion and forbearance.

Last week I said that we prepare for Advent by repenting, by going in a different direction. But, in what direction should we go?

## FRUITS WORTHY OF REPENTANCE

John the Baptist points the way. He begins by judging the crowd that comes to be baptized. He calls them a brood of vipers. That doesn't seem to be a good way to start a sermon does it? (I wonder what would happen if I started a sermon that way? I don't think I have the courage.)

But, I guess it did work for John because they kept listening. And he tells them that repentance is not just a good idea. It's a way of life. They need to bear fruits worthy of repentance.

He told the soldiers not to abuse their power. He told the tax collectors not to collect too many taxes. And he told everyone to share.

He said in effect that we get close to God by getting close to those who are in need. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

This is consistent with the life of the early church. The community formed by the Spirit of Christ was a community that shared. And it was this sharing that enabled the community of faith to grow. People had never seen anything like this before and so they knew

that in the compassion and grace of this special community that God had come near.

Jesus told his disciples that when they shared what they had with those in need, they were coming close to God. And conversely when they did not share they were separating themselves from God and bringing judgment upon their lives. (See Matthew 25:31-45)

In other words when the kingdom of heaven comes, there are some down to earth results.

## GENTLENESS

In our second lesson for today Paul reminded the Philippians that knowing the Lord was near should change how they treated people. He wrote, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

Joy means more than just pasting a plastic smile on our face. The look of redemption, the look of joy is seen most clearly in the way that we treat others. The truly joyful person is a gentle person.

This word can also be translated forbearance. Forbearance means to show patience and restraint in our dealings with others. It can also refer to an extension of time for the payment of a debt.

It seems to me that this is another way of saying, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” A gentle, forbearing spirit comes naturally to the one who continually rejoices in the grace of God.

It’s important to note that Paul does not encourage a gentle spirit from a safe house. Remember that Paul wrote this letter from prison. And the recipients of this letter, the Philippians faced certain persecution and even death.

The Roman government viewed the Christian faith with great suspicion. Christians after all insisted on saying Jesus is Lord instead of saying Caesar is lord.

The Romans took a dim view of such political sacrilege. The persecution for the Christian community would increase in the years to come.

But, in this world of hostility and suspicion, Paul advocates a gentle spirit. Paul does not counsel preemptive violence nor are the Philippians encouraged to flee from danger.

Instead, the Philippians are counseled to transform the world by acting in a surprising way. He tells them to meet hostility with joy and gentleness.

They are to let their gentleness be evident to all, and that presumably meant their enemies as well as friends. You could say that meeting hostility with a gentle spirit is naive.

And it is true that the gentle spirits have often been martyred for their faith. This eventually happened to the apostle Paul himself.

But, I believe that there is power in gentleness and forbearance. In this spirit we testify to our belief that the Lord is near and that his peace will guard us, if not in body at least in our hearts and minds.

One thing that always blocks joy is a desire for revenge and an angry spirit. Tit for tat violence has long been a staple of how the world does business.

But, the Savior, the king who comes does not plan to go along with business as usual.

What is his title? He is known as the Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6). And the angels still bring us the message of peace on earth and good will toward men and women.

As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the

Ephesians, Christ “came and preached peace” (Ephesians 2:17), and he is our peace (Ephesians 2:14).

## PUTTING FAITH INTO PRACTICE

A number of years ago Norman Cousins wrote an editorial in *The Saturday Review* in which he reported a conversation he had on a trip to India. He talked at length with a Hindu priest named Satis Prasad. The man said he wanted to come to our country to work as a missionary among the Americans.

Cousins assumed that he meant that he wanted to convert Americans to the Hindu religion. But when asked, Satis Prasad said,

"Oh no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs not membership, but believers. Not people who talk about their faith but live their faith.

The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity; but from what I read at this distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else.

I would ask that you either accept the teachings of

Jesus in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do.

I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."

John's goal was similar to that of the Hindu priest. John told the crowd that it wasn't enough to have Abraham as their father and recite the history of their faith. They needed to live their faith. They needed to put it into practice.

In this way they would prepare for the coming Messiah.

The story has been told of Abraham Lincoln who worshiped each and every Wednesday when in Washington D.C. at New York Presbyterian Church near the White House.

One Wednesday evening as Lincoln was leaving the service, one of his assistants asked him: "Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon tonight?"

Lincoln responded, "The content was excellent, and Dr. Gurley spoke with great eloquence. It was obvious that he put a great deal of work into that sermon."

"Then you thought it was a great sermon, Mr. President?" the assistant asked.

"No, I did not say that."

"But Sir, you said it was excellent sermon."

Lincoln replied, "No, I said that content was excellent and that the preacher spoke with eloquence.

But Dr. Gurley, on this night, forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great."

## THE GOOD NEWS OF REPENTANCE

John the Baptist did not forget this in his sermon. John was asking his listeners to do something great.

He asked them to repent and live new lives marked by compassion. He asked them to live with a passion for integrity and justice.

Why did he ask them to do this?

This would be the way they would prepare for the coming Messiah. And this is the way we prepare for the coming of the Messiah as well.

John has no doubt. The Messiah was definitely on the way. The Lord was near.

Do you believe that is still true? Do you believe the Lord is near? I do. And I believe that this is a reason

to rejoice and a reason to repent, to change our ways.

This is not a threat. This is not bad news. This is good news.

Did you notice the way Luke characterizes John's ministry at the end of today's passage?

After all the talk about repentance and bearing fruit worthy of repentance, after all the threats about judgment, Luke concludes,

“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

John's message is a mixture of joy and fear, good news and judgment. They are two sides of the same coin.

And today John preaches that same good news to us. Let go of the past. Repent. Lay it down. And take up new lives, lives worthy of the One whose presence you seek.

Rejoice. The Lord is near.

Amen.