

“Prepare the Way: Do”
Zephaniah 3.14-20, Luke 3.7-18

We have come to the third Sunday of Advent, more quickly than some of us would like, on our journey to the celebration of Christmas. This Sunday is traditionally known as “*Gaudete* (gaw day’ tay) *Sunday*” from the Latin for “rejoice,” or “Sunday of Joy.” The thing is, from our scripture today, we may not sense much joy, so what does that mean?

According to Taylor Burton-Edwards, United Methodist “Liturgy Man,” Advent was initially “an extended season of preparation for baptism, lasting seven weeks, much like Lent. As a season of baptismal preparation, and with its themes of readiness for the second coming, judgment, and new creation, it was also a generally ... ‘penitential’ season as well. So just as Lent has its ‘*Laetare Sunday*’ (fourth Sunday in Lent) to ‘lighten the mood’ a bit, so Advent has its ‘*Gaudete Sunday*.’”¹ So this week marks a temporary break in the somberness of the season.

However, as I pointed out earlier, it may be difficult, at least at first, to find joy in our texts for the day. We know we’re supposed to be happy and joyful—Christmas carols have been playing non-stop on several radio stations for weeks already, and almost every retail establishment has Christmas music running through their speakers. The mail has brought holiday greeting cards and letters, catching us up on significant events in our friends’ lives. And yet, many of us are feeling stressed and anxious, with a to-do list so long we *know* not everything is going to be finished in time.

And on top of that, “the church [is] making us listen (two weeks in a row!) to stories about a wild-eyed preacher from the wilderness who doesn’t yell only at the powers-that-be (the religious authorities, the puppet rulers, the empire) but at all of the sincerely open people who have bothered to come out here in the middle of nowhere to listen to his message warning of a coming judgment[!]”² Where, exactly, is the joy?

As I studied, read, prayed, and reflected on the scripture, I discovered three words kept coming to the surface: Judgment. Joy. Do. Now, the resources from Discipleship Ministries geared today’s message toward “Do,” and I have to admit that excited me because I’m all about “doing,” and about helping others see how critical discipleship is to our Christian life. But when I read the scriptures, judgment was what *I* heard first, and I had to dig further for the joy.

The passage from Zephaniah does sound hope-filled and joyful, and it’s because of the experiences the people have previously endured. One commentator puts the text into perspective: “The people to whom Zephaniah spoke this word were experiencing profound challenges. Their nation was embarrassed on the international scene: they were a pawn in the movements of the great world powers Babylon, Assyria, and others. Foreign armies were a constant threat and sometimes reality. Lack of food and water, the basic necessities of life, accompanied this instability.”³ Now, however, God “promises that the people’s fortune and future have been

¹ (Matthews 2018)(Cotto 2018)

² (Matthews 2018)

³ (Moland-Kovash 2009)

changed from judgment to hope, from oppression to liberation and from dread to praise.”⁴ So Zephaniah’s listeners are definitely feeling the joy.

I was wracking my brain trying to come up with a personal story or incident that would relate to this sense of joy after judgment, and interestingly enough, the example that came to mind was an experience Carl and I dealt with as parents when our son Thomas was in high school. I won’t go into all the gory details, but in a nutshell, Thomas and one of his buddies had retaliated to aggravating pranks by an underclass band student with inappropriate actions of their own. Carl and I were furious when a parent phoned us just as our son and his friend were walking in the door, and they immediately knew they’d been caught in the act; fear was in their eyes. I remember being so angry I told Thomas to go to bed and we would talk about consequences in the morning.

After some discussion, the parental verdict was handed down: the damage would be repaired as well as was possible, an apology would be delivered, and driving privileges were revoked for a month. There was no joy in *that* disciplinary measure, either from Thomas *or* his parents. It was a huge inconvenience. But when the prescribed punishment time was finally over, truly, there was joy. Joy, of course, for Thomas that he had his freedom back (and he hadn’t died in the disciplinary process!) and joy for us, as weren’t bound to act as chauffeurs for sports and band practices and teenage social schedules. There was also a kind of joy in knowing that we were teaching our son significant life lessons.

It’s not nearly the same significance, of course, as the situation the folks in Zephaniah’s day experienced, but it was, for us, a very challenging time, and we rejoiced when we all made it safely through.

When we look at Luke’s Gospel, we don’t especially hear joy as John calls the people gathered to hear him preach “a brood of vipers!” I have to admit, though, this passage always makes me smile just a little. How would you react if I got up here some Sunday and started out with that line? “You brood of vipers!” Usually I’m a little more low key than that—what’s the saying, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar? Anyway, can’t you just picture John out in the wilderness with his rough camel’s hair clothing, wild hair, and loud voice calling his listeners “snakes?”

So we hear the judgment in his message, but, again, putting his words into context will help us get to the joy. The situation was actually similar to the one we heard in Zephaniah: “In [John’s] day, the powers-that-be had arranged a world based on empire, with those at the top grabbing—through force and greed—the lion’s share of power and material wealth for themselves (imagine that!). However, it wasn’t just the Roman Empire and their puppets that experienced his wrath, but the religious institutions as well felt the sting of John’s rebuke.”⁵

⁴(Cotto 2018)

⁵ (Matthews 2018)

As one of the articles I read this week put it, “Things were all out-of-whack, they had gone awry...”⁶ So these folks were much like the ones Zephaniah spoke to, and really not all that different from us today, when you think about it. As Rev. Kathryn Matthews states, “John knew his audience, his congregation, and he read the signs of the times as well. It seems that he had to help them [remember] the promises that had sustained their ancestors for so long, in wilderness and exile. What strikes me about this preacher, however, [Matthews continues] is that his rhetoric combines grand anticipation and dramatic warning with an exhortation, a simple instruction that is so down-to-earth, so everyday life, so...**doable**.”

He doesn't tell the people to get back to church, to overthrow the Romans, to transform the world in some sudden, drastic revolution. No, he tells them the same things my parents told their...children [she says]: ‘Share with one another. Be kind to one another, don't fight. Be fair. Don't hoard, or lord it over one another.’”⁷

And there we have it. The crowd gathered around John asked, *three times*, “What should we do?” I think it boils down to the same thing we tell our children, as Rev. Matthews said: Share. Be kind. Don't fight. Be fair. Don't hoard. Don't be arrogant. Basically, love one another and find ways to help make the world a better place for everyone.

Prepare the way: “Do.” As one of my mentors told me long ago when I was stuck in a rut: “Just do something!” As a church and as individuals, we are busy people, and we *are* doing many good things. Sometimes, though, we look around at our seemingly small efforts and feel overwhelmed by the unmet needs. There *is* so much more work to do, this is true. And yet, we have been instructed to “go and tell,” and “go and do,” and as the writer of Galatians exhorts, “...let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.” (Gal. 6.9-10 *The Message*)

Prepare the Way: Do. On this, “Joy Sunday,” let us rejoice as we recognize the good things we are accomplishing, and let that joy energize us to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. Amen.

Works Cited

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⁶ (Matthews 2018)

⁷ (Matthews 2018)

