

First Impressions THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-
Zephaniah 3: 14-18 Psalm 12 Philippians 4: 4-7 Luke 3: 10-18
By: *Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

During Advent the prophets are rather persistent, aren't they? They are also very upbeat at least during Advent. In our first readings this Advent the prophets don't level indictments against injustice and religious hypocrisy though the rest of their writings have no lack of such judgments. Instead, these weeks we hear the other side of prophecy, the promise and consolation offered to a needy and devastated people. Indeed, today's Zephaniah reading practically dances with joy, while the rest of the book of Zephaniah is rather gloomy and ominous in its condemnation of the people's moral and religious failures.

Earlier Zephaniah promised that the Day of the Lord was coming when God would punish the people's sinfulness. In the passage immediately preceding today's (3:11-13), the prophet says God will leave a small group of those who have been faithful to God' the "anawim." These simple and lowly ones are the recipients of Zephaniah's good news. When the "Day of the Lord" ("On that Day") does come, those who have kept the covenant have nothing to fear. God will be in their midst, as God has always been. That "day" will be an occasion for rejoicing because even the just will be renewed in God's love.

When God does come, "on that day," how will God deal with sin and sinners? Will it be bad news for sinners? No, the good news announced in both Philippians and the Lucan passage today is about bad news for sin, but good news for sinners. (Note that during special seasons, such as Advent and Lent, all three Sunday readings blend. This is not the case during Ordinary time when the second reading follows a different and independent sequence so, preachers trying to find a "common theme" in the three readings during that time are going to be frustrated!)

In the days of Latin liturgy, today was called "Gaudete Sunday." The language may have changed, but the sense of today hasn't. In the midst of Advent, the dominant message is an invitation to "Rejoice." In the Philippians reading Paul picks up Zephaniah's message and calls us to rejoice. Why? Because in Christ the "day of the Lord" has arrived. God has dealt with sin by defeating it and offering sinners mercy. That is good news and a firm reason to "Rejoice in the Lord

always.” Is Paul just a “cockeyed optimist,” someone living in a world of his own, detached from reality? Hardly, since he writes to the Philippian church from prison. He knows the Philippians are in a difficult time, as he says earlier in the letter, “...for it is your special privilege to take Christ’s part not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him. Yours is the same struggle as mine...” (1:29-30). Both Paul and the Philippians are in “the same struggle.”

When Paul invites them to “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he is not telling them, or us, to close our eyes to pain and injustice and to “put on a happy face.” To use one more cliché, ours is not a “pie-in-the-sky” religion. Rather, Paul casts a sober eye at the struggles Christians endure and calls for rejoicing even in a world of war, violence, rampant AIDS, genocide, poverty, civil war, domestic abuse, church scandal, etc. The reason he can still encourage rejoicing is succinctly stated, “The Lord is near.” He knew consolation, strength and hope, not because he had an easy solution to life’s problems, but because in the midst of them he trusted, “The Lord is near.”

Does this faith invite a laissez faire approach to life that will take care of itself? Hardly. That wasn’t Paul’s mode of living his faith. Instead, like him, we can have courage to try to bring light to those who “dwell in the shadow of death.” With God guarding “your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,” there is nothing the Christian need fear to address: neither personal sin nor the sin that is ingrained in our culture and world. Paul invites us to take our concerns to God in “prayer and petition with thanksgiving.” There’s a little over a week till Christmas and things are quite hectic and may even have gotten out of hand. Paul’s message keeps us focused on the basics of the season: Christ is close at hand; the world’s excesses and sin will not get the best of us; we must keep our focus on Christ; express our hope and gratitude to God in prayer and, Paul tells us, express our “kindness...to all.”

On the subject of what we must do, Luke is very clear. In the verses preceding today’s gospel, John the Baptist, never a smooth diplomat, has called those listening to him a brood of vipers. He charged them with trying to escape from the wrath that was soon to come rather than repenting. That got their attention, so they now ask John, “What should we do?” Perhaps they expected John to put a heavy burden on them, call for repentance accompanied by highly visible and arduous proofs of a change of heart. What must these people do to truly be God’s people, the faithful remnant Zephaniah addressed, who would experience God in the midst

as their “mighty savior?”

John’s response to their anxious question, “What must we do?”, is disarmingly simple: he calls them and us to live good and faithful lives. So, for example, in the ordinary events of daily life we must include concern and response to the needs of the poor: “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none.” And whoever has food should do likewise. No complacency or miserly giving here! One can never say, “I’ve done my share for the poor,” for John says, if you have two cloaks share. In this case that’s half of what one has!

Basically, the Baptist is telling us to be faithful to our roles in life be good parents and honest workers; treat people justly. If we have authority and power over someone (“tax collectors”) don’t take advantage of them. Be fair and help those in need. Ours is not an other-worldly, mountaintop religion. We are to be honest people, characterized by lives of integrity; we should not take advantage of anyone and must treat them with respect. John calls us to be satisfied with what we have-- - and to do something for those who have not.

John the Baptist plays a strong role in Luke’s narrative. He and what he says, certainly dominate today’s gospel reading. Those who hear John cannot just listen to his message; they must show by their actions that they have internalized it. They cannot claim privilege and access to God merely because they are among the chosen people. Nor can Christians expect a special place or favor merely because we belong to a church. As John tells us today, we must do deeds that reflect what we have received and what we believe. We cannot put off to another time the serious self-examination he is asking us to do. He speaks with urgency that the one who is coming is ready to clear the threshing floor and separate the wheat from the chaff. No time to waste!

John says he is only, “baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming.” He is calling for a change of behavior, starting with repentance and following through with actions. He tells people they must prepare for the coming messiah by a change of life. Christ will follow up and bring to us the power of his death and resurrection. In Christ all will be new, and his baptism will be with “the Holy Spirit and fire.” That’s what we need if we are to sustain our commitment to Christ for the long haul “the Holy Spirit and fire.” Then our acts of love and service for the sake of the gospel will not be done just to curry favor from God. Rather, “the day of the Lord” has arrived and God is in our midst. The Holy Spirit

“fires” our desire, determination and energies to full time and lifelong service. Luke will soon remove John from the scene because our true focus is not John and his ethical call; but it is Jesus and the life-giving Spirit he gives us that will keep us faithful servants to Christ and enables us to vigilantly watch for his return.

There’s a lot of pain in our world. We certainly aren’t going to solve all the problems we see or hear about. But we can do something! Today we are invited to acknowledge who God is and what God has done for us in Christ. Today’s Eucharist is an opportunity to give thanks and praise for God’s wonderful works on our behalf. Then we will leave here to take the good news of what we have heard and experienced into the world. We do that mostly in our ordinary lives, by words and actions that form the stuff of our everyday living. Where do we see wrong? Who are those in need and in pain? Who need a kind word, a patient ear, a comforting presence? How are we being called to reflect the nearness of the Lord in our world? Will those who meet or know us experience that the day of the Lord has arrived? Will they have reason to believe the prophets and evangelists that their Lord is near, and we have plenty of reason to “Rejoice!” “Gaudete!”?

QUOTABLE

PRAYER BEFORE READING THE WORD

In this and every year,
in this and every place,
O God everlasting,
your word resounds in the wilderness of Advent,
calling us to stand upon the height
and to behold the splendor of your beauty.

Fill the valleys of our neglect;
bring low our mountains of self-centeredness.

Prepare in our hearts
your way of righteousness and peace.
Let our love become a harvest of goodness,
which you will bring to completion
for the day of Christ Jesus,
who was, who is and who is to come,
your Son who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.

----James Weaver, et al. AT HOME WITH THE WORD, 2007: SUNDAY SCRIPTURES AND SCRIPTURE INSIGHTS. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2006, page 12.

JUSTICE NOTES

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation.

All believers are called to faithful citizenship, to become informed, active, and responsible participants in the political process.

As we have said, "We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity

to participate more fully in building the culture of life.

Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts.

Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power."

Even those who are not citizens are called to participate in the debates which shape our common life.

----"Faithful Citizenship," US Catholic Bishops

CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a Christmas card to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about

them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Terry L. Ball #0017060 (On death row since 2/3/94)
- Frank J. Chambers #0071799 (3/10/94)
- William L. Barnes #0020590

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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