

Sermon for ADVENT III
December 16, 2018
By Sister Deborah Francis, CSJB

Our first two readings are summed up by the word REJOICE.

In Zephaniah, the message is “Hang in there. Better times are coming.” This passage is one of the readings from the Easter Vigil. It is full of anticipation. God has taken away the judgments against them. “The Lord your God is in your midst.” One day in the future God will restore their fortunes. Imagine you are in exile in Babylon feeling rejected by God and fearful of the future. Then the prophetic word announces future restoration. God will gather even the lame and the outcast and bring them home. Instead of disgrace you will have renown and praise.

Zephaniah says “God will renew you in his love, rejoice over you with gladness and exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” Can you imagine God rejoicing over you with loud singing? Can you imagine god singing? I don’t know about you, but I have real difficulty accepting that God rejoices over me like that.

We often underestimate the joy God has in his people. Too often we think that God is annoyed or irritated with us. How can we have a more balanced view? Jesus came here, at least partly, to show us the true nature of God. Remember that Jesus who as been given authority to judge us is the same person who died and rose again for us. As Zephaniah says “rejoice and exult with all your heart.”

Paul’s letter to the Philippians contains wonderful encouragement. Paul was writing to them from prison and likely facing death. He knew that they would face all kinds of trials and heartache not only from the Romans but also from each other. So what does Paul advise? “Rejoice, and again I say rejoice.” He recommends joy in the face of all this. Why? Because the Lord is near – we do not face life alone.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” The word translated here from the Greek as gentleness can also be translated as moderation, patience, softness or forbearance.

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According to William Barclay “The Greeks explain this word as ‘justice’ and ‘something better than justice’.” An illustration of this is the way Jesus treated the woman caught in adultery. Strict justice required that she be stoned to death. Jesus applied “something better than justice” – he applied mercy. Barclay says that one has the quality of *epieikeia* if they know when not to apply the strict letter of the law and when to relax justice and introduce mercy.

Finally we come to our Gospel reading for today. Why were crowds coming to John to be baptized? It certainly wasn't because he called them a brood of vipers. What were they seeking?

At this time in Israel expectations ran high that God would vindicate the sovereignty of his people and restore the Davidic kingdom. God would punish the wicked and reward the faithful by means of a final judgment. God would usher in a new and glorious age.

In the sect of the Essenes, the Temple was considered corrupt. They considered their assembled community to be the true Temple. They employed different rites of purification. They bathed in cold water baths as part of these rites. We know mostly about the Essenes from the Dead Sea Scrolls. There is some speculation that John the Baptist may have lived with them while he was in the wilderness.

So the crowd went out to hear a prophet who told them their connection to Abraham would not save them. John the Baptist tells them to bear good fruit worthy of repentance. If not, he says, God will destroy those who do not give evidence of their sincerity by the way they live their lives. After hearing these dire predictions of punishment, the crowd asks John “Then what shall we do?” John does not ask them to perform heroic acts of virtue to prove their fidelity to God. Instead he asks them to live their lives with charity and justice. Those who have two coats must share with those who have none. The tax collectors shall collect no more than is legally allowed. The soldiers are not to extort money from anyone by threats and to be content with their wages. The opportunities to bear fruit worthy of

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repentance are moderate ones. To quote Lutheran Pastor David Lose “Participating in God’s Kingdom is only available to them where they are, requiring a little faith to perceive the sacred in the ordinary.”

Despite their speculation that he may be the long awaited Messiah, John is very clear that he is not. He only baptizes them with water but one is coming who is more powerful than he is. That one is so great that John is not fit even to act as his slave. The coming one will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In other words, he will cleanse them from the inside out.

Where are *our* opportunities to bear fruit worthy of repentance? Perhaps staunching a wound we have caused by asking for forgiveness. Perhaps letting go of a grudge we are nursing or dealing honestly when it is hard to do so. Maybe we can be generous to others when we feel we have nothing to give. How are we preparing ourselves for the coming of the Messiah?