

December 12, 2021 – The Third Sunday of Advent

Rejoice! ... You sons of snakes!

Anybody feel like they're getting a little bit of a mixed message from today's texts of Scripture?

God will rejoice over you with gladness, Zephaniah says to Judah.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, Isaiah says to Zion.

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, Rejoice! Paul tells the Philippians.

You children of poisonous snakes, John tells those who come to be baptized by him. What do you think you're doing here?

At this point, people of God, I don't blame you if you are feeling inclined to turn to your neighbor sitting next to you and ask, "Wait, I thought we were rejoicing!"

After all this Sunday, we are over and past the hump day of Wednesday, Advent-speaking. More candles are lit on the wreath than not. We have less time to wait than we already have waited when looking to Christmas as a destination.

What then should we do?

Rejoice? Or be concerned about the axes, the fire, the pitchforks all around us?

Why not both?

The first to hear John the Baptist speak don't shy away from his words. Rather, they are intrigued. They lean in.

What if we, too, lean in? Let John demand our attention, regardless of whether it's in spite of, or because of his rough around the edge rhetoric?

I know I've been called names a lot worse. I know I've responded to calls to action before more to save my own hide than out of any altruistic, selfless motivations. I know

I've been called out before on my own nonsense by somebody who has my best interests at heart.

That doesn't mean it didn't hurt. That didn't mean I wasn't resistant to it. That didn't mean my palms didn't sweat, my stomach didn't knot the instant I realized, they're talking to ME.

Sometimes we need that direct in-your-face impetus that forces us to ask what do we do to get it right now that there's no hiding anymore how we've gotten it all wrong. All the while, the ax lies on the ground in front of us ... seemingly as a threat.

But can we change our perspective? It's not too late to do that.

In fact, I've got a wonderful vantage point from up here to see (it's on that Advent banner behind you) the effect of the ax doing its worse. It's an image of what Isaiah is saying just a chapter before the call to rejoice.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

God doesn't cut down, burn up or poke with sharp points without creating anew.

And so now – and always – rejoice!

God is bringing you and me into the good work. Rejoice for the question is not “What then should we do *for* our salvation?” but rather “What then should we do *with* our salvation we have already received?”

John's response to the crowds who asked him the question is not galaxy-brain insight. Give if you can and don't cheat folks. Well, duh. But that's really all he's got for them. Simple assignments. It's kind of sad but that's where

we have to start sometimes. On the path to being good people, try being ... not-terrible people.

So he addresses specifically the sketchiest folks in the crowd, the tax collectors, the Roman soldiers. It's as if he were here today to say to the members of Congress in the bunch, "Remember your oath of office and don't be a liar and a grifter" and to the car sales folks, "Don't sell any lemons and give customers a fair deal." Not to pick on the two professions tied in this year's Gallup poll for popular opinion of the least ethical American professionals or anything.

But for all listening, it's a message that God eats that kind of stuff up. Go ahead, give it a try! But in all seriousness, it isn't always that easy because you have to want to try. You have to repent, which means changing your way of being because you are committed to it. And committing to it because you believe that you can, because you believe that God can and will help and guide you.

You can bear fruits worthy of repentance. And you can also not. I think we've all tried the "not" option and experienced some consequences of that. But the fruit comes from believing you can turn it around because you believe you have been forgiven. That God's forgiveness of your shortcomings is not conditional on keeping it up but that it is genuine and abounding and limitless even. You cannot break yourself up to a point where God cannot put you back together better.

There are some scary tools involved. There is pain in process. But fire is a tool. It destroys but it also refines. Metaphorical chaff holds us back from being more full, authentic versions of ourselves. There is useless junk that's glommed on to all of us that we could afford to have burnt away. Aspects of ourselves we would be better off without if we are willing to be brutally honest about it.

And so again I will say, rejoice!

Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire might sound intimidating but that same Holy Spirit descends like a dove at Jesus' baptism. Remember those words, that capacity for gentleness the Lord gives us, as Paul tells the Philippians, when the heat, even though it's good for you, is getting to you.

Rejoice for you draw water from the wells of salvation, as Isaiah says, and that well never runs dry. Even if you're burning up, you are still always welcome to take a drink.

Yeah, John's good news to the people isn't delivered in the prettiest of packages. But it's meant for those of us who aren't the prettiest of packages ourselves. And it's good news that he knows it, God knows it and we know it ... and now we know it can't hurt us anymore to be who we are. Sinners, who are loved enough that God comes for us and rescues us from that sin. Saints, even if we are sorely lacking

any halo to polish. It's a mixed message but it's one we all need to hear.