

Advent 3C 2009

Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9-Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” John 12:7

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Amen.

**Today is rose Sunday, also known as Gaudate Sunday. Gaudate is the Latin word for rejoice and rejoicing is proclaimed throughout this morning’s readings, at least the first three readings anyway.**

**And then we have John the Baptist in the gospel reading. John, God bless him, was never one known for tact. But then his message was too important for that. He always spoke his mind regardless of who he offended or called out in public. And this week John doesn’t disappoint, John starts this week’s gospel with an insult if ever there was one!**

**“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” He is saying to the crowd, “All of you are a bunch of snakes and like snakes fleeing a forest fire you are fleeing what you have brought upon yourselves! Do you really think you can escape God’s judgment? Do you really think just because you are God’s chosen God’s wrath does not apply to you?”**

**Rejoicing and judgment. They seem so contradictory. How do these two fit together? There has to be some reason because otherwise the theologians who put the lectionary together wouldn’t have paired these readings. That’s what I tell myself anyway.**

**Rejoicing and judgment. If we really listen to the readings we hear something perhaps we have never heard before. What if we were to hear not rejoicing AND judgment, but rejoicing FOR judgment?**

**What if we were to believe that God’s judgment of us is a good thing? What if we were to face the judgment we know we deserve with all the hope and faith we can muster? What then? Hold onto that thought.**

**In Zephaniah we hear the prophet telling the exiles “Rejoice! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you...The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.”**

**For a people who were facing shame and oppression, for a people who had turned away from God and turned to worshipping pagan gods, for a people who wondered where the one true God was, this was indeed good news.**

**To be told that God had judged them and still wanted them, that God would not hold their infidelity against them but wanted to start a new relationship with them, to be told that God wasn't far off but was in their midst all along...how could they not rejoice over that? But we are told something else as well. We are told that the rejoicing would be mutual!**

**Too often we see ourselves as responding to God, but not God responding to us with joy and love. But that is the very picture Zephaniah paints, “The Lord is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you with his love; he will rejoice over you with loud singing.” God rejoicing over us. God renewing us. How can we not rejoice over that?**

**In the First Song of Isaiah we hear the same message from a different prophet. “Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.” Isaiah's message is easy to hear.**

**Like the peel of bells cascading through the air, tell the world that God is here...share your joy so that others can know not only the joy of knowing God but also know God's joy in knowing them; so that they experience God's rejoicing over them, of God renewing them.**

**The message is again repeated in this morning's epistle reading. Paul is in prison and yet he tells the new Christians at Philippi “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice...the Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.” Even in the darkest hours, even when they don't**

**know where to turn or what will happen, even in all the uncertainty of their lives, Paul tells them to rejoice, to rejoice always.**

**All of this takes us back to John the Baptist. All of this takes us to John slapping us upside the head and saying... “Who do you think you are? What do you think you are doing? Nothing can be accomplished by your running away from God’s judgment. Nothing.”**

**The reason nothing can be accomplished is for a reason that we often don’t think about. Not only can we not outrun God’s judgment, even if we could, we shouldn’t want to and the reason we shouldn’t want to is because without judgment there is no salvation. Without judgment there is no need for it. Without judgment there is no need for Christ in our lives.**

**So the “nothing” that can’t be accomplished is not the futility of our running away but rather the something known as God’s work in us. If we run away from God (and that is as simple a definition of sin as one can have) God cannot make us whole and healthy again and health is the root meaning of salvation.**

**Why do we run so far and so fast to escape judgment? What fears are brought up from the deep, dark recesses of our souls when we hear that word and know that it is our turn to be judged?**

**When I say the deep, dark recesses of our souls, I mean the place that we don’t even want God to see, the primal place where the root of all our fears lie.**

**Why do we fear judgment? Perhaps it is because we know what it is like to be judged by another human being. Perhaps throughout our life we have known more malice than mercy, more rejection than rejoicing. Or perhaps we fear judgment so much because it is we who have stood in judgment of others.**

**We look at judgment through a human lens but God sees judgment through God’s eyes and what is seen is very different. We apply all our human negativity and harshness to that word, and therein lies our fear.**

**But because what God sees is different, God's judgment is different. God's judgment carries not the characteristics of human judgment, but the characteristics of divine judgment. God judges not with malice, but with mercy.**

**I heard a story this past week that made me think of God's judgment. It has been a very long time since I read C. S. Lewis' Narnia chronicles. But someone reminded me of the book in the series, The Voyage of the Dawn-Trepper.**

**In the story, Edward, one of the children sent into the English countryside during WW II, gets turned into a dragon. I can't remember exactly how it happened, and I'm not so sure that it is really necessary to know. Anyway, Edward becomes this dragon, and Aslan, the loving lion that symbolizes Christ, has to peel all the scales off of Edward. It is the only way that Edward could become Edward again. Aslan had to break through the tough scaly exterior that had encircled Edward and kept him from being the person he was meant to be.**

**When we run from God's judgment we run from God being able to take the opportunity to peel away whatever it is that is holding us back from being all that God meant us to be.**

**John speaks of Christ coming with his winnowing fork in his hand taking the wheat with the pitchfork and throwing it up in the air so the air could carry away the chaff, the unnecessary and worthless covering of the seed kernels. We are told that the chaff will be thrown into the fire and burned with an unquenchable fire.**

**To share my own struggles with being judged, for the longest time I thought that meant me. I would be thrown into the fire and consumed. I was the worthless covering over the kernel that would become nothing.**

**That is absolutely not what this passage is about. And in my humble opinion is as wrong as one can get in interpreting this passage. This is not about burning our souls for eternity it is about burning our sins for eternity.**

**As is par for the course with me, I put the cart before the horse, or perhaps more correctly I mistook the cart for the horse!**

**What John is telling me, you, anyone with ears to hear, is that we will be what Christ saves, we will be the ones gathered in and it is our chaff, our worthless and unnecessary covering of sin that doesn't stand a chance.**

**Could there be better news? I don't think so. Let us rejoice!**

**Amen.**