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I wonder if Luke had tongue in cheek when he wrote the conclusion to his description of John the Baptist. Luke recounts John's less than diplomatic practice of calling his audience a bunch of snakes and his allegation that they were no more pious than a pile of rocks. He tells us that John demanded that people empty their closets for the poor and quit their most lucrative and self-aggrandizing practices. He went on to tell them that the world was about to be judged by its maker. Luke closes that extraordinary scene saying that all this was typical of how John preached the "good news."

From Luke's picture, it seems that although John made clear demands on everybody, the poor got the worst of it. John told them to give away every stitch of clothing they weren't wearing at the moment, along with any dessert they had saved for later. The others, tax collectors and soldiers, got away with being told to start being honest and stop acting like bullies. How was that good news?

Maybe John knew what he was doing. Perhaps he knew that the poor were used to the type of solidarity he demanded. Good people who themselves have known hunger will not allow anyone else to suffer it if they can help it. The same for the clothes. Destitute people understand the importance of feeling decent and keeping warm far better than anyone who has never wanted for a nice outfit. These demands

might not have been as outrageous as they might sound. Perhaps John was praising the poor for who they were. He could have been pointing to them in their threadbare outfits and calling attention to how they broke, blessed and shared their bread. He might have been telling them to keep it up, he might have been calling them blessed.

In that light, John's preaching actually begins to sound like the good news Jesus preached. John is describing what metanoia entails. Metanoia is repentance or conversion. It is an attitude that turns the world's values inside out. Metanoia is an approach to life that both hopes and works for the time when things will be as God created them to be. John was pointing out what that looks like in action.

This brings us to the message of this Sunday's combination of readings. Where John pointed to the sort of behavior that prepares the way for God's coming, Zephaniah proclaims that God is overjoyed to be in our midst. Zephaniah goes so far as to paint a picture of God partying with the people who have been saved.

Paul picks up on the theme by telling the Philippians that their life should be one of constant rejoicing. And why? Because the Lord is near, and there is nothing to fear. This, of course, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe that we are standing on the threshold of the reign of God, we will put on our party clothes and realize that we have no reason to hold back on sharing or strive for personal gain or exert our petty power.

If we believe that the reign of God is real and as near as our own hearts, we will become freer than we could ever have imagined. We will understand that we have nothing to lose in any relationship of love or solidarity. Then John's predictions of baptism by fire and the Lord's winnowing fan evoke images of a shared passion for justice and the clean-up in preparation for a feast of plenty, shared among all who want it. It is exciting rather than frightening.

On the Third Sunday of Advent, we as a church focus on our reasons for joy. The readings offer us multiple reasons to rejoice, all of which come down to two basic themes: God loves and saves us, and we are capable of loving one another with the freedom God's love engenders in us.

Let us meet John down by the river today. As we go there, we had better prepare ourselves. We need to arrive ready to ask what we should do now to prepare for God's presence among us. John, or whoever speaks for him, will not mince words.

But the prophets will also point to examples of people from whom we can learn. When we see the joy in their lives, we just might get the courage to follow their example.

### **ZEPHANIAH 3:14-18a**

Zephaniah has an affinity for extremes and he is a champion of anthropomorphic depictions of God. His book opens with images of wrath, warning that God is about to sweep everything off the face of the land. His second chapter announces the possibility that if the people humble themselves, they might be sheltered on the day of God's anger. Then, he goes right back to predictions of plunder and ruin. The third chapter persists in that vein, warning that it will be impossible to ignore the horrors that God will rain down.

Then, beginning with 3:9, Zephaniah tells us that God will purify the people and save a remnant who will conduct themselves as people of God. These are the people who will be addressed as daughter — Jerusalem, Israel and Zion.

Now, instead of the extremes of destruction and salvation, we have mirror images of daughter Zion and her God rejoicing in one another. It is no great surprise that the people would rejoice; their enemies had been routed and they had nothing more to fear. Their rejoicing can also be interpreted as exulting. There is a note of triumph as well as relief over what God has done for them.

The unusual feature of this passage comes with the description of God's rejoicing. The God who was just described like the terminator has turned around to become their savior. Zephaniah portrays God as a king, but even more like a proud patriarch who gazes on his people with absolute delight. At first, God rejoices and sings just as the people did. Then, Zephaniah adds new vocabulary that describes God joyfully contemplating the people and singing over them with delight.

The Scriptures do not often portray God as mirthful. We can find a plethora of depictions of God as powerful, slow to anger, rich in kindness, etc., but it is not common to get the picture of God being ecstatic, singing like people who have had their fill of wine at a festival. (One exception is Psalm 149:4 which the King James Version translates as "For the Lord taketh pleasure in his people: he will beautify the meek with salvation." This is almost like the God of Genesis 2 who made decent clothes for his wayward leaf-clad couple. Ponder those images for a while!)

This image of God's delight might take us back to Genesis 1 where we hear God pronouncing the very first judgment on creation. In Genesis 1, God evaluates everything as "good," until it comes to the creation of man and woman. God judges them to be "very good." As a preparation for Christmas, this reading from Zephaniah invites us to get caught up in wonder and to contemplate God's sheer delight in our being and salvation.

### **ISAIAH 12:2-3, 4, 5-6**

Today's psalm comes from the Book of Isaiah, one of many songs found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah, whose name means "the Lord is salvation," wrote the song around the phrase, "God indeed is my salvation." A phrase like that, so oft-repeated, can easily lose its impact. Our challenge is to sing this with the heart of a people who really know they have been saved. Singing this song reminds us that our salvation is God's doing, not our own.

While the song uses the first person singular, it is actually a communal hymn that echoes the songs of the Exodus. After the first verse, Isaiah broadens his scope to embrace the whole world. He tells the people who have been saved to proclaim God's deeds among the nations. As the Israelites know well, the only way to do that is by creating a just, and therefore, joyful and peaceful society. Such a society speaks for itself.

The refrain and last verse prepare us to consider the message of the Baptist. The psalm says, "For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." John tells us that he is coming. Advent contemplates the mystery of both Christ's presence and his coming in the fullness of time. Praying this psalm helps us to reflect on our experience of God from the history of Israel to our own day. It also reminds us that a people's true greatness comes from the way God's grace becomes visible among them.

### **PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7**

Paul begins this section of his letter to the Philippians with the one-word invitation, "Rejoice!" That command is actually an invitation to be holy. Paul sees holiness and happiness as inextricably linked. In his book *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Scripture scholar Gordon Fee tells us that to understand this passage we need to remember that "devotion and ethics for Paul are inseparable responses to grace." A godly person, he says, longs to be in God's presence, pouring out his or her heart. At the same time, godly people remain in the presence of God by doing what is

righteous. Holiness is a matter of heart and hands — and when the two cooperate together with grace, the result will be joy.

We see multiple characteristics of holiness in this reading which calls us to rejoice and give thanks, and then to be kind, and then to have no anxiety. All of this is possible because we take all our cares to God. That combination of prayer and action, of word made deed, is what leads people to be caught up in the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

Pope Francis gave us a modern approach to this in the apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*. In his opening paragraph, Francis tells us that Christ “wants us to be saints and not to settle for ... a mediocre existence” (#1). Francis is quick to disabuse anybody who thinks that holiness is a recipe for boredom. Picking up on contemporary desires to be oneself, he tells us that we need not fear holiness: “It will take away none of your energy, vitality, or joy. On the contrary ... you will be faithful to your deepest self” (#32). Francis is telling us that holiness is the path to fulfilling the unique potential each of us has within us, that is, “the most personal gifts that God has placed” in our hearts (#11). Holiness is then the route to genuine happiness.

Society often equates happiness with acquisition or performance. Advertising tells us how to buy happiness and recruiting ads for the Army used to say, “Be All You Can Be!” But even the Hallmark Christmas programs tell us that happiness that can be bought is counterfeit. As for the Army, the recruits may achieve new levels of physical fitness and marksmanship, but rarely are they portrayed as the happiest people on the block. The essential difference between the words of Francis and what consumerism and the Army promise is that the latter two attempt to mold you to their ideals, into what makes you most useful for their purposes. Holiness and the joy that accompany it come from allowing the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal your deepest potential and the mission that only you can accomplish. Francis invites us: “Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today’s world” (#23). That will bring you both love and peace.

### **LUKE 3:10-18**

After two readings that call us to joy, the Gospel sends us to the river to listen to John the Baptist. Although he is one of the greatest saints of Advent, he is never going to replace Santa’s jolly elves or the joyous angels as a symbol of the season.

Even though Luke skips over any mention of John's desert diet and style of dress, he still gives us an earful of the Baptist's fiery rhetoric. Instead of inviting people to rejoice because God's chosen one was coming, John warned them of the wrath to come, threatening that the ax was already aimed at the roots of their ancestral tree.

Demanding as it was, John's preaching struck a chord among his people. Everything indicates that he was immensely popular. When we note how the Gospels took pains to describe John as secondary in importance in relation to Jesus, we realize that many people must have confused the two of them, and that John had his own significant following.

John had an interesting, gradual pedagogy of conversion. The first people to ask him how they should change their lives were ordinary folk. John instructed them to treat the poor as honored members of their own families. Whoever had two inner garments was told to give one to someone who had none. If they had more food than necessary, they were to do the same. That calls for a level of solidarity rarely understood by people who have not experienced the precariousness of extreme poverty. People who have no guarantees about tomorrow have a unique understanding of the value of sharing what they have today.

When people a little further down the respectability scale approached him, John adjusted his demands to their level of moral development. Addressing the tax collectors who had built their fortunes by overcharging the powerless, John only told them to stop collecting more than required. Of course, that would just about put them out of business. (Their scam was based on an agreement to pay Rome a certain amount for the position of tax collector; whatever else they could amass was gravy.)

Amazingly, Luke tells us that soldiers also came to John. These were probably not Romans, but Herod's forces. Again, John seemed to go easy, telling them only to stop their most egregious abuses.

Perhaps the key to John's popularity was his authenticity. He did everything he demanded of others and more. He knew who he was and did not claim to be anything more. The word of the Lord had come to him; he was a prophet, but he was not the one to come. He baptized with water whereas the unknown one to come would bring fire. Little did John imagine that Jesus' fire would be gentler than his water, and perhaps he did not understand that it was still just as demanding.

While all our readings this week deal with hope, we might say that the Gospel is specifically about Christian or messianic hope. Zephaniah paints the hopeful picture of a God who longs to forgive and rejoices over the people. St. Paul and the psalm offer the hope that comes from believing that the Lord is active among the people and soon to be more fully present. But what John offers is the hope of a transformed world that will come about through people's collaboration with grace.

God is near, and that is a wonderful thing for those who want what God offers. It will be as costly as the cross. But the results will bring joy and peace for the converted as well as for all who benefit from the changes they bring about.

## **Planning: Third Sunday of Advent**

By Lawrence Mick

Now that we have arrived to Gaudete Sunday, we are reminded us that the joy of Christmas is not far away. These columns are written months in advance, so it is hard to know what people will be experiencing when this is published. It would be a surprise, though, if there are not many people who are having a difficult time finding joy in our world these days. With continuing corruption and disruption in governments around the world; with increasing effects of climate change bringing death and destruction across the globe; with wars and oppression killing and maiming soldiers and civilians in multiple conflicts; etc., it may be hard to feel any real joy.

That should lead us to ask ourselves where the source of Christian joy is to be found. It is not in pleasant circumstances or fortunate events, but in the love of God for us that transcends human limitations and sin. Can we lament the state of the world and find joy in God's love at the same time? Let us hope so, lest we all curl up in a ball in despair. Our faith calls us to be people of hope, not because the world offers us solid grounds for hope but because God's love and power will certainly be victorious in the end.

In the meantime, we cry out our prayers of lament, begging God to heal our world, while we continue to place our trust in God and find consolation and joy in the love of God that surpasses all our hopes and dreams. That dual thrust can shape petitions for the general intercessions, as well as the choice of hymns and the words

of the preacher.

That same dual perspective provides the basis for a joyful celebration of a communal penance service. We must lament our failings and admit our need for forgiveness. But we do so in the constant awareness that our God is always ready to forgive and to heal us and never stops loving us, no matter how badly we mess up our lives and our world.

If you are celebrating such a service this week, consider using some of the Sunday Mass texts to shape the service. Think, for example, how these lines might be heard in the context of a celebration of reconciliation: “The Lord has removed the judgment against you, he has turned away your enemies; the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear.” The Gospel passage includes the Baptist’s call to repentance along with the critical question posed to him, “What should we do?” That is a question we all need to ask God as we continue the journey of conversion and spiritual growth.

## **Prayers: Third Sunday of Advent**

By Joan DeMerchant\_

### **Introduction**

Today’s readings continue the themes of hope and expectation, adding the element of rejoicing — for Israel, for those awaiting the Messiah and for us. But there is also a summons to repentance and reformed conduct. The good news is tempered with a call to responsibility on our part. Like those before us, we are urged to hope and rejoice. In addition, we must ask the question: “What should we do?”

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, your coming was embraced with anticipation: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your coming called for repentance, as well as joy: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, your coming among us still requires repentance and action: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**



**Presider** We pray that this season may remind us to be joyful, grateful and responsible people.

**Minister** For the ability to model for the world a church that demonstrates love and joy and is an example of profound responsibility, we pray:

- For all who are afraid or discouraged, confused or disillusioned or who do not know where to turn or how to act and for our commitment to encourage and guide them, we pray:
- For the courage to challenge those who believe that building strong families, a just community, or a peaceful world is someone else's responsibility, we pray:
- For the ability to embrace and instill in our children a sense that anything is possible and that we are all called to create a viable future, we pray:
- For the humility and courage to acknowledge our need for repentance as individuals, as church, as nations, we pray:
- For all who find this holiday season burdensome or painful, especially the poor, the sick and the grieving among us, we pray:

**Presider** Gracious God, we are reminded that you have long acted on behalf of your people, bringing hope, relief and rejoicing. You have also challenged them — and us — to treat one another justly and responsibly. Open our ears and our hearts to hear and respond to all that you ask of us, as we reflect on Jesus' coming yesterday, today and tomorrow. In God's holy name, we pray. Amen.

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