

FIRST READING: Zephaniah 3:14-18a

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Zephaniah:

Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 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. On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6.

***Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.***

God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid. My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior. With joy you will draw water at the fountain of salvation.

***Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.***

Give thanks to the LORD, acclaim his name; among the nations make known his deeds, proclaim how exalted is his name.

***Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.***

Sing praise to the LORD for his glorious achievement; let this be known throughout all the earth. Shout with exultation, O city of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!

***Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.***

SECOND READING: Philippians 4:4-7

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians:

Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 3:10-18

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

The crowds asked John the Baptist, "What should we do?" He said to them in reply, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He answered them, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." Soldiers also asked him, "And what is it that we should do?" He told them, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages." Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I

is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people.

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent**

Today’s first reading is from the prophet Zephaniah. A bit of trivia; this is the only passage of his writing we use in our Sunday lectionary. By and large, his message is of doom and destruction on the Day of the Lord. He wrote before the Babylonian invasion and destruction of Jerusalem. This passage is an anomaly. This is the only hopeful and encouraging passage in the entire book. It can seem incongruous to the rest of Zephaniah’s message. Yet it revealed that as a man of faith, Zephaniah could hold hope dear. Hope amid chaos and threat is a powerful gift to have.

When he wrote, his focus was on places; the heights of Zion, the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. Since places and things have no capacity to have hope or need for encouragement, to whom and for whom did he write? To the people who lived in those places. There is a continuity of human experience. Social upheaval, political discord, conflicts between people and between societies have afflicted humanity to this day. Hope can come hard. Humanity’s nature is at the heart of the world’s problems and our limitations are central to our personal troubles. We hope for them to just evaporate; go away.

We pray to God to sort them out. We expect miracles to intervene and somehow change the reality around us. We hope for salvation from our woes. But is salvation a change of situations or a change of heart? When Jesus died to save us, he did not offer redemption for nations, institutions and business; it was for living people like you and me. Salvation is personal not universal. The world, as a whole, is not saved, but the people who live in it; one person at a time.

Today a new variant of COVID 19 has begun to spread. For us to pray for God’s intervention to end the pandemic is naïve. That’s not how God works. God changes us, not our situations. God works through each of us. For the pandemic to end, we must strive together not expect magic. Wear a mask in public, keep social distance and, for God’s and our sake, get vaccinated. The longer people refuse to do these simple things, the more we will insure the infection and death of many, if not our selves. Self destruction is part of the human condition of sin. It is only in Christ that we find salvation. There is no exemption from our witness to faith.

The hope of Zephaniah’s message was real. In the midst of his troubled times, he found hope. From where did his hope come? Might it have been naïve? Jerusalem was besieged, destroyed and its king and people carried off as war booty. Hope is one of God’s gifts like faith and love. Knowing hope was knowing God. His hope was real. My hope is real too, that we will hear the message of the gospel to serve each other before self. By working together to end the pandemic, by the grace of God, we strive to the Kingdom of God. This is the gift that God offers us.

What’s the difference between Paul’s message to rejoice in the Lord always and have no anxiety and don’t worry; be happy? On the surface, maybe not much. There’s a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is an emotion and as we all know our emotions come and go. Joy is something deeper and akin to gratitude. Seeking to be happy may provide

moments of it. Joy can come through reflection. We do this on Thanksgiving. Gratitude for who we are, what we've been able to do and the ones with whom we abide can come easily. Gratitude, like joy, comes from within. Happiness can often be out there and elusive.

Other emotions, fear, sadness and anger can prevent us from finding happiness. Joy is more of an approach to life. It is possible to know joy in sorrow. We can grieve our loved ones who have died while finding joy in their memory. We share our memories with our living loved ones who also grieve with us. In doing so, we thus share the joy of remembering together. I interpret experiences like that as moments when we're being touched by God. There's scriptural basis for this too, "When two or three gather in my name, I am in their midst." Paul is not being whimsical or a fool. He's revealing an inner truth of his life. He wrote to the Philippians from prison as they were being persecuted for Jesus. He has showed us a profound truth of the way God transforms grief into joy.

He wrote the letter and as he wrote, he had to reflect. This is something I have experienced as I write these reflections. He probably dictated his words to a scribe who would read them back. Paul had the opportunity to hone, correct and refine his thoughts in the process. The act of composition was an opportunity for Paul to experience joy. He and the Philippians were separated. The act of his writing and the communities reading bonded them over the distance. I experience a similar sense as I have written these reflections over the last year and a half and some have read them.

When I preach, I speak my words once and never again. With my Sunday reflections I spend a day in composition and a second with the proof reading, editing and refining the words I've written. I save them, too, on my computer. Throughout the pandemic, I have gone back to reread them from time to time. I don't precisely read them; my computer reads them to me. Microsoft Zira is the voice I use by default. Paul knew, and I have discovered that such writing, as this is, is an act of intimacy. The writer writes and the reader reads.

Luke's gospel gave a voice to three groups of people who came to John the Baptist seeking new life; the crowd, regular folk like us, soldiers, who were Roman enforcers, and tax collectors, also agents of the foreign occupying Romans. They all asked, "What should we do?" John basically told them all to act with kindness and respect of others. He told them to do their best as they faced their responsibilities. To John, this was to be the sign of their new life and repentance. It was one thing to make a pilgrimage for a single event, another to take the experience to heart and live it. John's message can be adapted to our lives. We seek new life in Christ and to be his witnesses in the world. Heeding John's advice we will find what we seek.

This doesn't happen very often, but once in a while, after mass and all dolled up in my priestly vestments, a little kid will come up to me, "Are you God?" I always laugh and say, "God no!" I then try to explain I'm just another person who's wearing funny clothes and using a microphone. Every time I read this gospel story I remember those experiences. From our Christian perspective, we use the term "Christ" as synonymous with God because of Jesus. Christ actually means one who is anointed by God in Greek. The word in Hebrew is Messiah.

We use these words in relation to Jesus. To us, the word Messiah refers to Jesus the son of God and the second person of the Trinity. He was to save humanity from sin and death. To Palestinian Jews this had a much different context. Who would God's anointed be? Would it be one like Moses or David? Would the Messiah unite the people and cast out the foreign Romans to establish a new Jewish Kingdom? Could the Messiah establish the Messianic age of Peace?

There was a political and religious aspect to the term, but no one anticipated a divine incarnation. No one expected the Messiah would be God made human.

Some Jews of the first century expected the Messiah; some did not. What John actually thought and believed we will never know. From the perspective of the four gospels he pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. The Baptist has a prominent role in each gospel. John and Mark begin with John's appearance in the wilderness preaching and baptizing. Each named him as the voice in the desert who would prepare the way of the Lord.

In the words of John, the true Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. What did John's words mean? The story of the Pentecost was also written by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. The sign of the Spirit's arrival was a strong wind and tongues as of fire. Is this what he meant? If so, that has only happened to the small group gathered in the upper room on Pentecost. Faith is a powerful experience. Having it has certainly made a difference in my life. However, I do not remember anything about my baptism. I was less than two months old. My confirmation happened when I was ten. When the ceremony was over, I felt the same as before it. Yet at ten I became an altar boy, at twelve a lector and at thirteen I entered the seminary. Now at sixty eight, I have served as a priest for forty two years. Does that constitute fire? If not, it certainly denotes dedication.

A bit of self reflection for all of us can lead to a similar understanding. The Holy Spirit has led us to this day in faith. How have our experiences shaped us? How has adversity molded us? Have our lives all been love, simplicity and ease? John used the image of winnowing and threshing of grain. Certainly grain for food is the desired commodity. But what about the rest? The chaff and straw have uses too. It could stuff mattresses, used as absorbent flooring or thatch roofs. John mentioned unquenchable fires. Did he mean hell or as fuel for heat?

The difference between grain and chaff is that everybody's got to eat. John has described a process of purification. John is not describing food preparation. He's referring to the process of the conversion of life in God through faith. It is easier to get caught up in the analogy's symbolism than God's Word to enter deeply into our lives. That's the call of the Baptist; hear the Word and live your faith in action. To do that is a life-long process and commitment. For that, the Holy Spirit gives us what we need.

Hope in adversity and joy amid troubles may seem absurdities, but we know them and can find them; if we look. We cannot turn them on like a switch. We can discover them as we discover God's presence in adversity and troubles. Personal growth, deeper understanding and compassion for others can be the result of facing our troubles and responsibilities. God has given us the means; through faith as God shares with us infinite, eternal and unconditional love.

May our hope lead us to lasting joy.

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December 11-12, 2021