

REPENT AND REJOICE

Zephaniah 3:14-20, First Song of Isaiah, Philippians 4:4-7
& Luke 3:7-18

Two great Advent words ring loud and clear in our scripture lessons on this third Sunday in Advent, two wonderful ways in which we can participate in God's answer to that prayer in today's collect – *stir up your power, O Lord, and with your great might come among us* – those two words are, **repent** and **rejoice**.

John the Baptist is the great figure in the forefront of the 2nd & 3rd weeks of Advent. Last week John entered the scene; this week we hear some of the harsh rebukes and tough details of his preaching. Today we hear him loud and clear delivering his message to *repent!* He offers a baptism of repentance and he leaves little doubt about the very real change he expects to see in the lives of those who come out to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Repent. I have always loved Frederick Buechner's succinct definition of *repentance*: "*To repent is to come to your senses. "It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying "Wow!"*" (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row, 1973) Repentance has less to do with regrets, remorse and confession than it does with claiming in God a new future, a new possibility.

This was what John the Baptist demanded from those who flocked to hear him in the wilderness. "*What then should we do?*" the crowds asked him. "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.*" The same for whoever has food – share with those who have none. He called the tax collectors to collect no more than what was their due. The soldiers he admonished not to extort money by threat or force. So he invited them – and us – to care for and to respect others, to share our resources with those who have so much less than us, to live not for our selves alone, to let go of privilege, and not to abuse our power.

So often when we think of repentance we think of someone like Tiger Woods or some politician caught in a web of infidelity and lies. They are suddenly *repentant*, simply because they got caught. I think that image sells the word short.

When I think of repentance I like to think of Millard Fuller, who with his wife founded and for many years led Habitat for Humanity. Fuller began a successful marketing firm while he was still in law school. By the age of 29 his entrepreneurial drive had made him wealthy and successful. But at the same time his business prospered, his health, his integrity and his marriage suffered. In their brokenness they turned to Jesus Christ and really read what he had to say in the gospels. So Fuller and his wife decided to give away all their possessions and seek a new direction in life. They joined Koinonia Farm, a Christian community near Americus, Georgia, led by Clarence Jordan, where people were looking for practical ways to apply Christ's teachings. Fuller initiated a housing partnership ministry, building modest houses on a no-profit, no-interest basis for low

income families. Homeowner families were expected to invest their own labor into the building of the home. The model eventually grew into *Habitat for Humanity*, which intentionally following Jesus has built over 350,000 homes around the world housing over 1.75 million people. The foundation for a new 8 family condominium project is going up right now on W. Main Street in Stamford.

Repentance often does begin with remorse and confession, but it should never end there. John the Baptist calls upon us “*to bear fruit worthy of repentance.*” True repentance invites us to see the possibilities of what God working in us can do. True repentance is less about changing our own lives (though it certainly results in that) as it is about giving our lives away for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

We have the opportunity to serve many such causes: Habitat for Humanity for one, St. Luke’s Lifeworks, feeding the hungry, our partnership with a school and clinic in rural Haiti, teaching our children or fellow adults about Jesus, and so many other wonderful ways to serve God’s Kingdom through serving others. True repentance doesn’t just *lead away* from self and sin and brokenness, true repentance *leads to* service in God’s Kingdom.

The second great Advent word for today is *rejoice!* This third Sunday in Advent is often called *Gaudete* Sunday from the Latin, *rejoice*. *Rejoice* is the first word in the traditional reading on this day from Philippians 4:4: “*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.*” *Gaudete!* The pink candle in the Advent wreath represents a heightening of expectation and note of joy. Indeed our scripture readings today are chock full of joy.

The prophet Zephaniah invites the people of Israel to rejoice in God. He gives six great reasons for God’s people to sing and rejoice. The first reason is that we and God are linked in relationship. “*Oh daughter Jerusalem*”— we are God’s children, his people, God’s sons and daughters. Our God, the Lord who made heaven and earth, invites us into a living relationship with him. So we are invited to sing and rejoice.

The second reason for singing and rejoicing is that we are forgiven. “*The Lord has turned away his judgments against you,*” Zephaniah proclaimed. Jesus on the cross has taken our place and forgiven all our sins. Rejoice and sing!

The third reason for singing and rejoicing is that God is with us. “*The King of Israel, the Lord,* Zephaniah prophesied, “*is in your midst.*” When Jesus gave the great commission to his disciples at the end of Matthew he promised to be with us always to the end of the ages. We rejoice because our God is with us.

The fourth reason for singing and rejoicing is that God has the power to renew us if we are prepared to be open to that power. “*Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love.*” God’s Spirit is in you. God’s power is available to us. The same power that was present in Jesus is living and active in you and me.

The fifth reason for singing and rejoicing is that we have an ally in our fight against all that oppresses, against all that belittles and harms us. Zephaniah proclaims that God “*will deal with all our oppressors.*” We are not alone in our struggles. God promises “*to change our shame into praise.*” As Paul promises in Romans 8:38 that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Rejoice for God fights for us in the battle against evil and oppression.

Finally Zephaniah’s sixth reason for singing and rejoicing is that God can be grace to us in bringing the broken and torn fragments of our life back together. “*I will bring you home,*” God promises in Zephaniah’s prophecy. “*I will go and prepare a place for you,*” Jesus promises you and me. He will heal us and save us and ultimately bring us home. (The six reasons for rejoicing come from Herbert O’Driscoll in *The Word Among Us, Year C, Volume 1*, pgs. 23-26, Anglican Book Ctr., 1997)

So, on this third Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that we have every reason to sing and rejoice. Our other scripture lessons join in that song. The First Song of Isaiah invites us to *draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation*. Paul exhorts us to “*rejoice in the Lord always.*” And if perhaps we missed it the first time he repeats himself, “*again I will say rejoice.*”

I have an Advent exercise for you to do sometime when you have a couple minutes to open a hymnal. Turn to the “*Praise to God*” section in the hymnal – hymns 372-433 – and skim through one or two lines from each hymn. Here are just a few.

- *Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love, hearts unfold like flowers before thee, praising thee their sun above (#376)*
- *O worship the King, all glorious above!...(#388)*
- *Now thank we all our God, with heart and hand and voices ...(#396)*
- *Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King! (#402)*
- *O bless the Lord my soul...(411)*
- *For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies, Christ our God, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise (416)*
- *This is the feast of victory for our God... (418)*
- *Immortal, invisible, God only wise...(423)*
- *When morning gilds the skies, my heart, awakening cries, may Jesus Christ be praised! (427)*

We are invited by the Apostle Paul always and everywhere and especially in our liturgical year on this 3rd Sunday in Advent to *rejoice*.

Repent and rejoice; one might think they are very different actions. But this third Sunday in Advent helps us see how they come together. Both actions move us closer to God.

Both are responses in faith. Both actions let God live and triumph in us. Both are Advent actions – a way for God to come to us and for us to come to him.

We prepare to meet and welcome our Lord more deeply and fully into our lives as we repent and rejoice. Rejoice because the gift of God in Christ in you is wonderful indeed! Repent, because the promise of new life in Jesus is so good that you want to grasp it more fully, more deeply more truly. *Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.* In that power assist us to *rejoice* in you and *repent* to live more fully in your Kingdom. Amen.