

“Give thanks to the Lord; call on God’s name.
With joy you will draw water from
the wells of salvation.” AMEN!

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally
called Gaudete (Go-det-eh) Sunday.

It is recognized with the pink candle
on our Advent Wreath.

Gaudete is Latin for rejoice.

It makes sense because we recognize
the call to rejoice in the themes today.

In Zephaniah, we heard the call
from the prophet to rejoice!

Exult with your whole heart.

There was a calling to come
home and to celebrate.

That is nice to think about those
who might be able to return or
go home for Christmas. (Pause)

In Philippians, Paul exhorts his beloved

church in Philippi to “Rejoice in the Lord, always;
again I will say, rejoice!”

The irony of Paul’s message to the
church in Philippi about “joy” is that
he writes this “Rejoice” letter while in prison.

And not only that, he wrote it to a congregation
that was extremely worried about him.

So much so that they sent one of their own
to find out information on how
they might help Paul.

They sent Epaphroditus, who, on his journey,
himself came close to death while risking
his life for the work of Christ.

The people in Philippi are waiting for news...
any news... about Epaphroditus and Paul,
and as we all know, waiting is hard.

We don’t need to wait for
news much these days.

Most is instantaneous on our phones or
24 hour cable news stations.
Truth is we have to be careful on
what news we consume,

but that's for another sermon. :-)

Today, we are reminded that there are
other things we do wait for... news
about a health exam,

permission from doctors to be able to go home,
and we wait for a world to come back
to an ability to gather safely together again.

We know about these kinds of waiting. (Pause)

Paul's letter must bear the hopes, dreams,
and longings of the imprisoned apostle.

He needed to spur them forward in their ministry
even though he faced suffering and
uncertainty about his own future.

Paul reminded them of their partnership in
the common cause and about their goals
for proclaiming the gospel.

The stakes were high for them as their
very lives hung in the balance.

This section read today, is in the closing of
the letter to the Philippians and Paul urges them
to rejoice.

He doesn't urge them to deny reality or
hide from pain, but to rejoice by
seeing past it.

For Paul, joy is not a feeling that is
dependent on circumstances.

It is the response by a person who has
higher purposes in mind, and
from a person who chooses
to reflect that higher purpose even
when it appears like other
powers might be winning.

In Advent, this is the joy that stems from knowing
that one day all will recognize Jesus.

One day all our suffering and
waiting will make sense. (Pause)

Last week, you may recall our illustration
that when a pastor preaches... God is here.

Today, Paul reminds us, "God is near."
And for this recognition he urged the
church in Philippi,
and our Tallahassee church,
to rejoice!

The theme of rejoicing runs through each text,
but unfortunately it doesn't look like
John the baptizer got the memo!

Let me read to you his words from
the gospel of Luke in The Message translation:

“When crowds of people came out
for baptism because it was the popular
thing to do, John exploded:

“Brood of snakes!

What do you think you are doing slithering
down here to the river?

Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is
going to deflect God's judgment?

It's your life that must change, not your skin.

And don't think you can pull rank by
claiming Abraham as 'Father.'
Being a child of Abraham is neither
here nor there - children of Abraham
are a dime a dozen.

God can make children from stones

if [God] wants.

What counts is your life.

Is it green and blossoming?

Because if it's deadwood,
it goes on the fire." (End)

Ouch, John! Where's your call to rejoice?

John reminds us that Advent is not only about joy,
but about waiting, hoping, and it is
about judgment, too.

For John's message to us is the same.

If we think of repentance as just being "sorry"
then we miss out on the forgiveness of sins
that we require.

We must bear fruits worthy of our repentance or
face a cleansing by fire. (Pause)

Today, dear siblings in Christ, we take
a pause from the rush and consumerism
of Christmas to take in the message
from John the Baptist.

We are wise to curb our desire to see him
only talking to the corporate moguls and
political despots.

John is speaking to everyone
within earshot of his voice,
including us.

This Advent, we are called to ask
the same question they asked him:

What then should we do?

Repentance is a change of perspective.

A green and blossoming life
makes visible the way we are to go
about doing things with an understanding
that God is breaking into the world.

Bearing fruit worthy of repentance is
removing the extra coats in our closet
and giving them to those without any.

Food is to be shared.

You, in uniform and with gun, don't take
advantage of your position in the police force
and use it to hurt or discriminate.

Hey tax man!

Charge what is required and not a penny more
to line your own pockets.

Note that John gave specific answers
to the question: What then shall we do?

Everyone has to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Note also that what the prophet
suggested his audience do is to
be a part of fixing the broken system.

Coat makers don't want you to share coats.

That hurts their bottom line.

Police officers, some at least,
don't want fellow officers to admit
faults embedded in their training.

The system doesn't want a police officer
to criticize another officer if they
cross a moral/ethical line.

It breaks the fellowship of secrecy that
permits racism and ignores

systemic police brutality.

If a tax person cannot line their pockets
then it becomes harder for the government to
hire tax officials and if they can't pocket
some collections then they'll have
to be paid their fair compensation.

John, here not only addresses individual
decision making but points
to a broken system.

It is no wonder that in the next two verses
that follow our reading in Luke, we find
that Herod Antipas did not want
his system reformed.

It was built to keep him in power!

For he was involved in many evil things and
it was nothing for him to add one more evil thing
to the list... false imprisonment.

He locked John the baptizer up for announcing
that God was breaking into the world.

We must know that not everyone wants
God to be near.

They might pretend they do, but
when it comes to adjusting their lifestyle
to no longer exclude people there's hesitation.

When it comes to making fair business decisions
or healthy family dynamics there's the
desire to instead presume that we

have advantages over others that give us
the permission to hurt, deceive, and deny
other people's dignity. (Pause)

This Advent we are called to consider what
we must change in our own lives?

When Advent reminds us that God is near,
the good news is that God is
not finished with us, yet.

There's still time.

In the baptism of John, he inspired his audience
to prepare for Christ, to be ready
for the Messiah.

Prepare by being cleansed in baptism and get
ready for the One more powerful than he
to come near.

In the baptism of the Holy Spirit,
the one that comes later in Jesus' story,
we read how a fire is kindled in you.

The Holy Spirit is stoked and building inside of you
and changing you for the better from
the inside out.

Just as fire is kindled, so is the Spirit and
this is good news!

This is John's way of saying, Rejoice!

Because most times that fire is
introduced in the Bible it signifies the
presence of God,
not of eternal damnation.

Fire is the sign of God's presence;
proof God is near. (Pause)

Look, we all know deep down,
we all know that there are things in us and
in our world that needs to be
scrubbed clean and burned away.

What is it in you that needs to be burned away?
What is it in our world that needs to be cleansed?

These are the honest questions of Advent.

Honest questions lead us to pause and consider
that the Lord is near... and that is reason to rejoice!

AMEN!