

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 16, 2018  
Third Sunday of Advent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Psalm 85:1-6  
Philippians 4:4-9  
Luke 3:7-18

Did you notice the final verse of today's Gospel lesson, where Luke tells us:  
"John used many such warnings as he announced the *Good News* to the people"?

I wasn't around back then, and maybe there is something I'm missing. But I simply don't get it. I struggle to see what is so "good" about this news.

How could these people receive being called snakes and vipers as good news?

How could these folks hear that they were poised for judgment and understand that as good news?

How could they hear that a baptism of unquenchable fire was coming, and interpret that as good news?

If this message of John was good news, I'd hate to see what *bad* news looked like.

And here we are today, gathered in God's presence on this third Sunday of Advent.

At a time of year when festive music fills the airwaves and our I-pods with the message of Christ's coming as a babe in Bethlehem -- how might it be construed as Good News when I stand here and tell you that we are all poised for judgment, that the ax is even now laid at the root of our lives?

In this season when we are decorating our homes and hearths, baking cookies and planning time with family around tree and table, where's the Good News in being told that God isn't concerned with the labels we wear, but with the fruit that we bear?

We've got images of the ax severing the roots, of winnowing forks, of fire burning away chaff. We're confronted with a radical call to ethical responsibility, a call to generosity, compassion, and learning to live responsibly in community. If John's crowd didn't ask the question of John, we certainly can ask the question today. How do these images, and this message, come to us as *Good News*? Can't we just go back to singing "It's the most wonderful time of the year" and baking cookies?

To complicate matters further, this third Sunday of Advent is when we light the rose colored candle. It's the candle symbolizing joy, and our other Scripture lessons call on us to "rejoice" that the Lord's presence is drawing near to us. My task as a preacher today, then, is to place John the Baptist's words along side of Zephaniah and the Apostle Paul, and to find the joy in John's message.

Indeed, I believe there is a note of joy sounded in John's message. We simply need to discover it. Zephaniah and the Apostle Paul are not contradicting John when they call on us to be joyful. And in fact John's message, when we unpack it, can help us to rejoice and to experience this as the most wonderful time of the year.

It is the most wonderful time of the year, but not in the way that Andy Williams or Johnny Mathis or Peabo Bryson speak about. It is the most wonderful time of the year because the arrival of the child in Bethlehem signifies that Zephaniah's promise has come true, that the Lord our God has arrived to live among us.

And it is the most wonderful time of the year because the birth of the child in Bethlehem is God's low-key way of saying that the reign of God has broken in, *and every promise the prophets held dear is now in motion toward fulfillment.* And perhaps the greatest of all these promises is this: **that evil and all that is not God's highest purpose will be defeated -- even in us.**

What makes John's message of repentance and judgment *Good News* is that the defeat of sin and evil and the establishing of God's highest purpose for the world can begin NOW *in us* and can shape our lives NOW in the present. Indeed, this is what John is calling for. John wants the reign of God to shape and control

people's lives *now*, even as it will fully do so in the *future*. John knows that evil will be purged away -- from the cosmos, and from *us*.

But that purging need not be reserved for a single day at the end of time, where it is thought of in terms of *punishment*. That purging can be a *present reality* at the hand of the Holy Spirit, and can be understood as God's *refining* work in our lives, bearing witness to the fact that God's kingdom has not only *broken in*, but is *busting out*, because the rule of sin is broken. The power of oppression and tyranny and injustice is demolished in us *now*, even as it will be in its fullness *then*. The reign of God as a *future* reality is bleeding into the *present* and shaping our lives *here and now*.

Gospel artist Karla Worley recorded a song that draws on the images of our Gospel lesson today.

*There is a fire that sears the soul  
There is a winnowing light  
Kindled within, a passion begins  
That draws us completely to its side.  
One holy passion, one great desire  
Consuming and filling our hearts with its fire  
Burning away all that keeps us in sin  
Til we are changed, and all that remains  
Is one holy passion for him.* [From *Ever Faithful*, copyright 1987, Star Song Records]

On this third Sunday of Advent, John reminds us that the little one who comes to us as a baby in Bethlehem is the One who comes to us as a *refining fire*, a

fire not meant to punish and destroy, but to burn away all that keeps us in our sin and brokenness.

John calls on us today to embrace the flame. See the Spirit's refining fire not just as a way to prepare you for one day at the end of time, but for *all* the days to come.

And here is perhaps the best news of all. When (by God's grace) you repent and begin to live your life like the kingdom of God has already come -- you can rejoice and be glad that it soon will.

*Come, holy one, Thy will be done  
In this moment, this third Sunday of Advent, set our hearts on fire.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.