

Advent 3, Year C
December 15, 2024

In this time of extreme danger to folks from different countries looking for safety in America, how appropriate that we find ourselves in Year C, when many of our readings will come from Luke's Gospel. His overarching message in introducing the world to Jesus Christ is This is the Savior of all people, not only Jews: Luke traces Jesus' family tree back to Adam – the first person, not necessarily the first Jew – and includes the intensely unpopular Samaritans; Luke's Gospel is also known to recognize women as well as men in helping to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel tells of John the Baptizer, born to a priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, cousin of Jesus' mother, Mary. One day, as Zechariah was offering incense to God in the Lord's sanctuary, an angel appeared to him and announced that Elizabeth would soon bear a child. One cannot help but be reminded of Hebrew Scripture's account of similar news to Abraham and Sarah, likewise quite well-on in years: Sarah, as Elizabeth, thought to be well beyond child-bearing years, and assumed to be barren. A barren woman is still in this day and age looked upon by some as "something incomplete" but even more in Sarah and Elizabeth's case, an indication of disfavor by the gods or God. And without missing a beat, the angel instructs Zechariah to name the child "John," or "God has shown favor." Because Zechariah doesn't entirely believe the angel, he is struck dumb and remains unable to speak until after the child is born.

Fast forward and we are standing in line, waiting to be baptized by John, only to be called names by this strange man, standing in the river dressed in camel-hair. "You brood of vipers! Repent!" he shouts at us. How do we do that? You need to turn away from sin, to ask forgiveness. If you have an extra coat, give it to someone who has no coat and if you have more than enough to eat, give food to those who have none. Your tax-collecting policies demanding more than you are owed so you can pocket some, your offers to remove false charges in exchange for money - these are sins for which you must repent if you truly want to avoid the judgment coming your way. We ask John, "are you the One that is coming? Messiah?" John answers, "I am not. The One who is coming is far greater than I; I'm not even worthy to

kneel before him. I baptize with water; he will purify you with fire and fill you with his Spirit. There was, and is, in Halakha – Jewish Law and tradition – a purification rite, a bath called “Mikveh.” It is a “bath of full immersion in naturally sourced water,” the act of immersion known as “*tvilah*.” When John says he baptizes with water, is he perhaps referring to the ceremonial rite Jews already practice, but calling on his brothers and sisters to do more, clearly implying that the old rite is insufficient: they must turn away from their sinful ways as preparation for the new and different ritual cleansing that establishes its recipient as a child of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The baptism the One Who Comes After offers is a purification of body, mind, soul and spirit. John warns us that honorable lineage counts for nothing, it really doesn’t matter where you were born, how important you are: God can replicate descendants of prophets, kings and priests from rocks on the shore; what matters is the fruit you bear, your right relationship with God. If you stand firm and straight as a tree, but the fruit you bear is foul, you will be cut down. He who is coming is armed with a winnowing fork which will separate what is to be gathered, stored and protected from that which is useless and will be thrown into everlasting fire.

Of the four Sundays of Advent, Advent Three is often said to be the Sunday of joy but even as I hear Zephaniah and Paul’s invitations to rejoice, I continue to feel a backdrop of darkness. A young couple was discussing having or not having children, and one said, do we want to bring a baby into this world so full of horror, hope and fear? What an apt description of our world! So full of horror, and when I begin to lean into hope, it seems Hope comes strolling towards me, holding the hand of Fear. Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, for I have turned away your enemies, I have no more judgments against you, I will remove disaster from you. But enemies and disaster stare me in the face every day, I want to cry out. Stir up your power and come among us; but we continue to be hindered by our sins, so how will we know where you are? How do I know whether I am bearing good fruit or bad? Why shouldn’t I be chopped down and thrown into the fire? In spite of John being a formidably odd character with a rather frightening message, the urgency he manifests is based on love for humanity and salvation of souls. John the prophet has been tasked with preparing the

world for the ushering in of God's Kingdom on earth; he too, just as the One that is to come, is turning the world upside down. If one reads between the lines, one can hear John saying, "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, for the Lord is in your midst; he will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in his love." Joy will enter this world, in spite of its horror and sin. John urges us toward the knowledge that the Lord is near, and in the words of Paul, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving and joy, we must seek to make our requests known to God. May we in all humility communicate to God our hopes, our fears, frustrations, disappointments, because in God's world – amidst even the darkest of sin and horror, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.