

III Advent

December 15, 2018

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Philippians 4:4-7 The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard
your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18 "What then should we do?"

Zephaniah (3:14,17) – A prophet in 7th century BC, said “rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!; the Lord God is in your midst.”

Canticle 9 is from Isaiah (12:6) said – “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Paul (Phil 4:4) – “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Rejoice, exalt, shout, sing: All describe **profound joy** over their experience of God's presence.

Then there is John, who sets a very different tone from joy and singing. People had better get ready for God, because he is NOT happy. John called the crowd a ‘brood of vipers’ trying to escape the impending judgment of God. His harsh language and fiery prophecy convinced the people who gathered at the Jordan River to hear him: Vengeance was about to fall upon them; and if they would listen to him and do as he said, they could escape the wrath of God. He called for heart-felt repentance. Only that would prevent them being ‘cut down and thrown into the fire’.

John predicted that someone was coming who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. He would clear the wheat from the chaff, and would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. There was not much in John's message that called for joy and singing.

John understood that he was there to prepare the way for the Messiah; but the fact that Jesus was more concerned with *healing, reconciliation, and love* than *repentance* led John to question whether Jesus was really the One whom he was called to proclaim (Lk. 7:18-20). “Are you the one, or should we expect someone else?”

Jesus, unlike the prophets who came before him, challenged Israel to be “the light of the world”. The role of the Holy Spirit was to kindle a new fire in us, a divine fire, that would inspire us to live by a higher standard than trying to protect ourselves from divine vengeance.

In our Advent Wreath, this third Sunday of Advent is marked with the lighting of a pink candle, differentiating it from the blue candles for the other three weeks of Advent. The pink color marks this to be **Gaudete**

Sunday (gow-day-tay), meaning **Rejoice Sunday**. It is not an accident that the call to 'rejoice' is offered by our pink candle, to offset the hellfire and brimstone preaching of John. The prophets Zechariah and Isaiah rejoice that God is in our midst. Paul rejoices that God has sent Jesus to us. We rejoice in the sacred birthday that took place on a Christmas morning (2,018+33=) 2051 years ago.

Within us, most of the world feels this call to rejoice and sing. Despite the crowds on the roads and in the stores, we feel joy. In the hectic race to get everybody on our list just the right gift, we feel excitement. Hearing the same old Christmas songs by Bing Crosby and Dean Martin on the radio, and singing carols that we know by heart, we feel the sense of this being sacred time, when the possibilities for divine mystery are real.

For me, the joy, excitement, sensing of the sacred, are not feelings that creep up and surprises me on Christmas morning. The experiences of the mystery of Christmas are not squeezed into a moment, or a few hours. They are contained in the journey toward Christmas. I feel blessed in the journey.

Examples: baking loaves of Quick Breads for the school and office staff;
being in a gift exchange;
jamming with the music team to choose some guitar-led Christmas Carols;
seeing the streets lit up with decorations;
getting smiling greetings of "Merry Christmas" all over town;
and hearing the school children prepare for their Christmas recital next week.

Don't miss out on noticing the joy, the excitement, and the sense of the sacred this Christmas season.

I have discovered that the 'feeling of Christmas' is alive and well only if I hold onto the expectation that day by day I will see God in the journey.

As you journey through your own preparations to celebrate the birthday of Jesus at Christmas, rejoice in the profound joy, the excitement, the sense of sacred time in the journey to Christmas: the event that shouts out: "God is with us." Amen.