

By: Elizabeth Prevost on Dec. 13, the Third Sunday of Advent

Today's readings seem to build us up, only to let us down.

The words of Zephaniah invite the people of Israel to

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,

he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;

you shall fear disaster no more.

Isaiah's words echo that reassurance:

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, *

for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

And Paul too tells the people of Philippi to

"Rejoice in the Lord always," assuring them that "The Lord is near."

These are messages of hope, comfort, rejoicing, and peace, declaring that the Lord is in our midst. But then we come to the unsettling words of John the Baptist, who tells us that the coming of God means immanent judgment. Having been told by Zephaniah that God has removed judgment and that they are to fear disaster no more, the people of Israel are told by John that the Messiah will bring indictment, wrath, and that he will separate the wheat from the chaff. And yet we are told that this is good news. How can this kind of judgment possibly be "good news"?

But these messages are more closely related than they might initially appear. All were produced during a time of anxiety and conflict.

Zephaniah's words were intended to endorse the reforms of the king Josiah, who outlawed pagan worship after the fall of the Assyrian Empire, and

Zephaniah's words today follow a warning to the people that they must reject idolatry and corruption in order to build a new and holier state. Paul was writing to the Philippians from a Roman jail. And John the Baptist was speaking to fellow subjects under an oppressive rule of the Romans and their local collaborators. The soldiers and tax collectors in his audience were the hated symbols of that occupation, a system in which the structures of power could be manipulated to exploit those members of society who were already the most vulnerable.

In a world where success seemed tied to greed, corruption, dishonesty, and exploitation, it was easy for God's people to lose their way. Yet Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Paul offer a vision of a people restored to a life of faith and purpose, and John the Baptist offers a means of making that vision a reality. He addresses his whole audience, made up of all classes and professions, of both foreign and local origin, reflecting Luke's universalist message of salvation that he directed to both Jews and Gentiles. The tax collectors and soldiers seemed just as anxious, just as desirous of John's baptizing, and just in need of his wisdom as those in the crowd who might have looked more virtuous. All alike were asking him, "Teacher, what should we do?" The answer is not to invoke the old covenant, for that has become an excuse for complacency. Instead, in posing the question of how to escape judgment, John's answer seems to be, simply: do more, and do it for others.

For me, this fall has been a particularly anxious time: going through my review for tenure, wondering if the future is secure, trying to process recurring bad news about those near and far, all amidst crushing workloads. So I admit that "doing more" is not necessarily an attractive prospect. Indeed, I feel like I spend all day, every day, doing, to the point that I'm doing so much that none of it is getting done well. Much of this work

already involves doing for others, and I often become frustrated that these demands leave very little meaningful time to devote to myself.

Am I, too, implicated by John the Baptist in God's judgment? What more can I possibly be doing? I can well identify with those in the crowd who ask somewhat despairingly, "And we, what should we do?"

But upon further reflection, it becomes clear that Luke is not telling us to do more, but rather to look at what we're already doing and then change the priorities of those efforts. Although a radical figure with a seemingly radical message, John the Baptist was not asking others to follow in his footsteps, renouncing everything worldly and retreating to the desert; nor was he promoting the overthrow of an entire empire. Instead, he suggests that if we do what we already do a little differently, it can have a profound impact. If you have two coats or more food than you need, share them with others who need them. If you collect money for the state or take up arms to defend it, do not abuse that power at the expense of others. Luke is telling us through the message of John the Baptist to enact change from where we already are. We are being challenged, but it is a doable challenge: to let ourselves be guided by compassion, selflessness, and social responsibility in discerning how best to use our resources in the service of others.

Here at St. Paul's, it was not long ago that we were promoting a capital campaign to physically modify our church structure so that we could do more. In the wake of the economic downturn, we have had to retool those priorities. But God has not stopped working in our plans, and we are using the opportunity to look inward, to use our resources and our creative energy to make use of what we have already been given in the service of one another and the community.

I was reminded of St. Paul's evolving mission in reading a piece written by John C. Morris for *The Christian Century*.¹ It told of a highway in Vermont that was the site of many serious accidents, because vehicles had to accelerate up a steep mountain, only to find a sharp hairpin turn at its crest. The family that lived in a nearby house always kept a stash of blankets ready for victims of accidents as they awaited the arrival of emergency crews. Local residents have been petitioning the state for years to reconstruct the road to enhance its safety. These people are using their own, often limited resources both to ameliorate what is already wrong, and to work to make it right. In their case, it is quite literally a matter of making the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. But as Morris concludes, "John the Baptist seems to be saying something similar" to all of us: "the curves of injustice, immorality, and inhumanity need to be changed into smooth paths so that everyone will see God's salvation. That is God's plan, and it is not wishful thinking to proclaim it."

So these stories and exhortations illustrate that "What should we do?" or "what more can we do?" are in fact the wrong questions. As Luke Bouman has observed, the right question is instead, "what is God doing?" Bouman writes that throughout the Old Testament, "God is choosing from the people a remnant who will live out his covenant once again. Finally, in the Gospels, only Jesus remains faithful, but that is enough. Salvation is unleashed for a whole cosmos through Jesus. In the end, a new way of living, connected to the old covenant of Israel, is established. God's people live for others rather than themselves, as Jesus does, because God lives in Jesus for all the people. Thus, out of judgment comes salvation and, through it, a new way of being in the world. God, not the people, is the author and director and

sole actor in this drama's first act. In Jesus, God is preparing the creation for return from a long exile."ⁱⁱ

In other words, none of us can escape judgment, but all of us can expect salvation. Judgment and salvation are not an either/or, but rather two sides of our human experience and our relationship with God. We are all implicated in our failures, but all of us can expect mercy and redemption in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

So let us wait prayerfully to see "what God is doing." Let us be open to the unexpected ways in which God reveals his presence. Zephaniah, Isaiah, Paul, and John the Baptist all sensed that the Lord was near, but they did not necessarily know the specific form that his appearance would take. In our world of anxiety and iniquity, what opportunities is God giving us to right the wrongs, to make the rough places plain? How is God calling us to be his agents of change? How will we answer that call through the resources we have already been given? For this is the good news that John the Baptist proclaims: that God is working out his purpose through us, through each and every one of us, in the flawed context of our own lives. That putting ourselves in a right relationship with others will restore our relationship with God. And that if we lose our way, God will bring us back. Salvation is here, directing us not only to proclaim but to live the good news. Let us prepare the way of the Lord.

ⁱ John C. Morris, *The Christian Century*, November 29, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Luke L. Bouman, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, October 2006.