

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#) / [Canticle 9](#) (Isaiah 12:2-6) / [Philippians 4:4-7](#) / [Luke 3:7-18](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

The People of Advent

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Sometimes I feel that the best response after a gospel like that is for our liturgy, with all of its beauty and careful order, to come to a grinding halt. Just in time for Christmas arrives John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, and like many prophets, he is no politician. He insults his listeners almost from the moment they arrive on the scene. They've come out to the wilderness seeking something from John: perhaps a bit of truth, perhaps a bit of hope. What they get is the "brood of vipers" epithet, a fiery accusation of their shortcomings, a litany of their failures of faith. We might wonder if this John is the "prophet who stole Christmas," the one who takes the wind out of our sails at a critical moment in all our preparations. Maybe he's the one who leaves a spiritual lump of coal in our stockings for being naughty this year – a proverbial "bad cop" for Jesus' "good cop."

This gospel is one of the rare moments in scripture where prophetic witness gets coupled with practical advice – a gracious moment, if you will, in the prophetic tradition where the people are stunned to silence and careful listening. The prophetic temper has their rapt attention. The people have come to John seeking out *metanoia*, what we translate into our common language as "repentance" but have recently, in the Christian tradition, collapsed into a narrow understanding of simply turning away from sin. John's *metanoia* is so much more than that – it means complete transformation of not only the individual, but of society, of the world itself. The proclamation of the Good News is that God's impending reign is not just going to make us feel better, like popping some kind of pill delivered by the divine pharmacy, but is going to completely upend our perspectives, our decision-making processes; and even the very way we interact with one another, Creation, and our Maker. We might have thought we were getting a cute little child for Christmas. Instead, the gift wrapped up in prophetic fire is a completely new way of life, an utterly new path that will radically alter the way we've been going.

The people who come to John know in their heart of hearts that something is wrong with the world and their place in it. The Gospel of Luke highlights the tax collectors, pariahs not only of first-century Palestine, but of the wider Greco-Roman world. They were notorious for adding on to an already crushing burden of tribute to Rome and pocketing the difference. And, if they were Jewish, they suffered the additional ignominy of being considered ritually impure for handling the money of Gentiles as part of their regular labor. Soldiers as well get specific treatment in this gospel – how to behave justly in an occupied land where they are largely viewed by the locals as imposters and not to abuse their physical power for their own gain.

But for the rest of us – the "us" being both the general crowds that came out for John's baptism, and the "us" millennia later who come for a bit of good news this day, John minces no words. There is no transformation in simply sitting comfortably in the faith we have inherited, whether we claim Abraham as our ancestor, or expect

our claims as Christians as sufficient by themselves for salvation. Baptism is a participatory event, after all. God kicks it off, but then as in all relationships, awaits our response, awaits our participation in bearing good fruit.

We have been taught to embrace a Gospel of grace, yes indeed. But it is never enough to simply say, "I believe," and then get on again with our busy lives as though nothing has changed. It is never enough to say simply, "I belong," and then avoid the hard work of relationships that belonging to Christian community and taking our citizenship in the wider world demand.

What would John the Baptist say to us, these days, as we continue the slow climb out of recession? As we in California and this country continue to face double-digit unemployment? As our Anglican leadership continues to publicly duke it out over bishop elections and human sexuality while HIV, preventable disease, poverty, hunger, and homelessness continue to consume our sisters and brothers? As our world leaders gather in Copenhagen to hammer out a bit of justice not only for Creation, but for the teaming poor and our children's future most threatened by climate change? As we as Americans expend more of our blood and treasure, adding yet more to our military might in Afghanistan?

What would John the Baptist say to us, these days, as we engage the Christmas routines that are so familiar this time of year? "Has anything changed in us?" he might ask of each of us. Are we each truly ready to embrace the transformative grace of Christ and take ownership of our faith and share it with others around us in need?

If we indeed agree with those who came to John that something is wrong with the world and our place in it, if we are prepared to embrace a new teaching that will upend even our most carefully ordered lives, if we dare to say yes to God's invitation to participate in the grace that is coming into our midst, then we truly become an Advent people. Advent people recognize that their faith is not just a Sunday morning phenomenon, but a week-long endeavor. Advent people prayerfully turn over their lives each morning and each evening inviting the Spirit's gift in for change – sometimes radical change, if necessary. Advent people are ready to speak the truth to one another, to power when necessary, and always to themselves. Because, in the words of Christ, it is the truth that sets us free. Advent people are on a quest of humility, willing to listen deeply to God's call in their midst and follow it even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular.

In these and so many other ways, Advent people prepare for the coming of Christ. In these ways you and I participate in the grace we receive at our common table week in and week out, the love we have day in and day out, the gift of life we are given with each passing breath. So be still for a few moments this day, my sisters and brothers, and listen for the call of John the Baptist at the shore of our collective Jordan. What are you being called to do and be differently this Advent? Then go forth and do it, whatever it may be, and live again into the transformation God is unfolding even now in our hearts and lives as we await the coming of our Savior.