

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's two days before Christmas. The candles on our advent wreath are all lit. The crèches up at the front of the church. We'll be singing songs later about shepherd's called by angels and love, the baby Jesus gently sleeping. And the gospel reading has John the Baptist at full volume. How does his Christmas message begin? "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Not much cheer in John the Baptist's words this morning. But John does serve to keep the season real.

As we look at the other readings set for today and we consider the Christmas themes, John the Baptist will help us descending into the vacuous sentimentality which so often dominates this season, and I want to turn to our epistle from the book of Philippians and speak to a theme, which we find there, which is entirely appropriate to this season — the theme of rejoicing. So Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice," and there's an element of rejoicing in all the readings set for today. I don't know if you noticed.

The prophet Zephaniah says, "Rejoice and exalt with all your heart." In the canticle, Isaiah says, "You shall draw water with rejoicing," and this of course is a season of rejoicing and celebration. What we celebrate in church is the coming of Jesus amongst us or the coming of God in Jesus in human form. God came in Christ to transform the world, so when we gather and rejoice this season, we're celebrating the most important thing that's ever happened in the history of the world. We're celebrating something that has changed the world and can change our lives too: God coming amongst us in the baby Jesus.

G.K. Chesterton said, "Religion might be defined as the power which makes us joyful about the things that matter. Fashionable frivolity might be defined as the power which makes us sad about the things that do not matter." We're joyful at this Christmas time because we're celebrating something that really matters. God has come to us. As our readings say, "God is in the midst of us." Our rejoicing in this Christmas season is not frivolous. It's not mere

sentimentality, and it's not escapism from the rest of life.

How can it be when the Christmas story has those bitter edges, which still resonate with the world's experience? The harsh voice of John the Baptist reminds us that the Christmas story we hear afresh again these days is not a cute fairy story. It features a baby who was forced to flee when young because of political persecution. Remember how Joseph and Mary had to go on the run to cross into another country as refugees because of the persecution they faced at home, and we're mindful too that this story happened in Bethlehem, a town that's now heavily militarized and is surrounded by an eight meter high wall.

Our rejoicing is not escapism. God came into the world in Jesus to transform the world, and we recognize that this process of transformation is ongoing. It's not complete, so we recognize that our joy is made complete as we join in with God in His divine process of transformation. Joy is never an end in itself. C.S. Lewis said, "Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness," which is why I think Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

We rejoice in joining with God in the service of others, because those who bring sunshine into the life of others cannot keep it for themselves. Here we look to the message of John The Baptist again. "Whoever has two coats," he said, "must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." As Christians, we don't follow this instruction reluctantly or out a sense of duty, but with joy. We rejoice to do the things that matter. So let's look to rejoice this Christmas to look past the frivolity and the sentimentality and to see the wonderfully profound truth that in this baby Jesus, God has made himself known. Let that be the source of our rejoicing.

Amen.