

The Book of the Prophet Zephaniah is a short little book consisting of 53 verses. 41 of those 53 verses are filled with words of warning about the terrible day of the Lord when “God will utterly sweep away everything from the earth.”(1:2) But today’s passage begins with these words: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” The reading from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians begins with these words: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice...The Lord is near!” And after all the gloom and doom in the readings these past weeks, we are probably thinking to ourselves, “At last! Finally, we’ve got some scripture that’s in touch with the season.” Right? Rejoice! Amen! After all, this is the season of joy. The carols are blaring, the colored lights are twinkling, the parties are in full swing. So we’re thinking, “Let’s have some scripture that goes with the season. This is the quintessential season of joy.”

But then we meet John the Baptist again in today’s Gospel reading, and what does he have to say? “You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

There’s a cheery message. Where’s the joy in that?

Well, this is a season of joy, and there is joy to be had. But John the Baptist has stepped forward to tell us that as followers of Jesus we need to come by that joy honestly. The message is that if we really want to see what’s in that manger-bed in Bethlehem, first we have to make peace with this fanatic in the wilderness. That’s not an easy thing to do, because the confrontation between John the Baptist and what the world has done with Christmas is like a head-on collision at 65 miles an hour.

Think about this image: Picture in your mind John the Baptist with his stringy hair and scruffy beard and camel’s hair shirt with the wing of a half-eaten locust hanging out of his mouth, standing next to that jolly, obese caricature of Bishop Nicholas that we see at the shopping mall. In 21st century American society, who wins? No contest.

Have you ever received a Christmas card with a picture of John the Baptist on the front with a message inside that says, “Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers! Remember, the ax is lying at the root of the trees?” I haven’t seen that one yet.

Do we have little John the Baptist ornaments to hang on our Christmas trees, or a John the Baptist figure for the creche? I haven’t seen those either.

After all, this is the season of joy. John the Baptist is talking about the worst in us, but this is the season that brings out the best in us — doesn’t it — or do we just try to cover over the worst with tinsel and holly and brightly colored wrapping paper?

John the Baptist knew something about human nature. He knew that when company is coming we may do some cleaning and some getting ready, but at the last minute, for a lot of us, there is a mad dash to shovel armloads of clutter into drawers and closets, only to be hauled back out again later once the coast is clear. John knew human nature. He knew that when I heard him lash out at the “brood of vipers” I would be watching from the sidelines and thinking, “Boy, they’re really getting theirs!”

That’s why John turns around and looks straight at me and says, “And you, don’t tell me you’re exempt because of where you live, or where you work, or because of who your father was.”

John the Baptist knew human nature, and he knew we all need to change. But he wasn’t just telling us to change. He was calling us to repent for allowing ourselves to believe that there isn’t anything that needs to change. John is looking at us with our expensive clothes and shiny cars and fancy houses and smiley faces, and he is knowing what is really

there in all of us. And he is hitting us right in the face with a dose of ice-cold Jordan River water, and he's saying, "You, follower of Jesus, tell the truth."

In Alcoholics Anonymous and the other 12-step programs that are giving back life and hope to so many people, the truth is told in its simplest terms: "My name is Bill, and I'm an alcoholic."

On this Third Sunday of Advent, that is what John the Baptist is urging us to do, to tell the truth. Not to sail along as if there is no need to change, or to tell ourselves that it's all taken care of, that the changes have been made, once and forever, but to tell the truth. Not just to shove the messiness in our lives into drawers and closets, but to truly clean up our spiritual house.

Do I treat people differently depending on their race or socio-economic status? Tell the truth.

Do I eat too much, sleep too much, drink too much, gossip at all? Tell the truth.

Am I silent or passive in the face of discrimination or bullying or injustice? Tell the truth.

Am I dishonest in business or in my relationships, or in any way? Tell the truth.

Am I giving back to God an appropriate portion of the best of who I am and of what I have? Tell the truth.

This morning John the Baptist is here to remind us that the joy of this season, the true joy of this season, can come only by way of the truth. The power and the true meaning of the season can come only if we are willing to look at ourselves honestly. The baby in the manger-bed can become our savior only if we are able and willing to acknowledge our need for salvation. The season of Advent is slipping away, and now is the time for telling the truth.

And then, Rejoice; again I will say Rejoice! The Lord is near.

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