

December 17, 2017

(John 1: 6 - 8, 19 - 28)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, marking the third Sunday in Advent, we light the rose colored candle in our Advent wreath. Why? This Sunday is traditionally called “Gaudette Sunday”, from the Latin word meaning “rejoice”...and, as a result, the purple or blue color of penance is lightened to a rose color. The themes throughout the readings appointed for today are highlighted in “joy”.

Joy flows from the expectation for excitement recited in the poetry of Isaiah. Joy also appears in Paul’s epistle or letter to the church at Thessalonika in Greece. It is all either predicting or later experiencing the joy that we also know in the Advent, the coming incarnation of God, increasingly revealed in the light of Christ, all as we await the full brightness of the promise of our deliverance in the nativity of our Lord at Christmas.

But, for some reason, our gospel passage is completely different. Has a completely different feel to it. There is no positive emotion oozing out of that passage. Instead, it is dry stuff....just the hard facts, if you will. The nuts and bolts of data reporting, of interrogation. Imagine being under the bright light of an interrogation room, being asked questions like the suspect of a crime.

Here they are....the heavyweights. Ancient Israel’s equivalent of the FBI...the very essence of Homeland Security if there ever was one in biblical Jerusalem:

“Who are you?”	“I am not the Messiah.”
“What then? Are you Elijah?”	“I am not”.
"Are you the prophet?"	"No."

Did you notice? Up to this point, they have no idea who John the Baptist is. And neither do we. In his totally negative responses, he is also totally effacing. Completely humble about himself. That, in itself, seems remarkable to us...particularly in this day and age! Look around. Would you agree that, in this modern Western culture, the default tendency is to do the exact opposite?

When was the last time you heard someone decline to tell his or her story when asked? We are more likely to grab for our 15 minutes of fame. Self promotion, self focus is IT today. Celebrity status...just being a “star”...seems to be the desirable goal of a life’s work.

We are flooded with celebrity magazines all around us. Entertainment Tonight, and other related television shows. Even a television network devoted to nothing but what? Fame, and glamour, and....

John’s responses are so foreign to our current thinking.

“I am not anybody important. I am not Elijah, nor the Prophet. And I am certainly not the Messiah”.

Well, for one thing, he sure did not look the part. Here is this mangy guy, standing in the middle of a shallow river, with unwashed hair over his shoulders and a long, scruffy beard. And, according to the gospel of Luke, he does not sound like the herald of good tidings, either. The Pharisees came out to see him, and his first words were, “You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance..even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire.”

How about having that message on your Christmas card this year?

But in today’s gospel message, they asked him a simple question, and his simple answer was “I am not the Messiah”

“I am *not* the Messiah.” Put that on your refrigerator door. Seriously. Because our ability to know Jesus as the Christ begins with the confession that we are not.. Not what? Not who? Well, that we are not anything, or anybody. In other words, as long we rely on our own strength and wisdom and resources, we hold God at a distance.

So, there you have it, my fellow vipers.

The world is in a mess, and we are largely...or perhaps it is at least more theologically accurate to say entirely...to blame. The world that God made and called “good” very often does not appear that way. But here we are, on this third Sunday in Advent, with flowers, and vestments, and hymns, and everybody except this John fellow demanding that we REJOICE.

It seems to be a “don’t worry, be happy” sort of mood, when we vipers just want to find a place to say “bah, humbug”. After all, the tree is decorated in many homes, but there is no real joy there. People around the world hurry and push to buy and spend, and yet the hungry and homeless are all around us. We keep looking for the peace on earth, goodwill among all.

So, how can we rejoice in the midst of all this turmoil...in our own complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes? Fellow vipers?

Well, we are rather good at general confession, and are fairly unanimous about generic love. It is the specificity that gives us trouble, and we are happier to love our neighbor as ourselves at something of a distance.

But the reason...indeed the only reason that it is not insane to suggest that rejoicing is in order in this broken, troubled and fallen world...is that God not only created it, but that God became real to us by entering into it, and has redeemed it, and continues to redeem it. So, to the hungry, he comes as a fellow beggar. To the homeless, he comes as one who has no place to lay his or her head.

To those parents in Connecticut now some years ago, who had to face the unspeakable terror of burying their very small children even as presents were under the tree, he came as one who has tasted death and transcended it. For in Herod's wrath, he himself was nearly among those holy innocents for whom Rachel still weeps.

Only as we recognize a power greater than ourselves...and confess our need of his grace and love, do we truly experience him. For to know who he is, we need to be clear about who we are not.

And that, my dear friends, is why the joy....symbolized by this Shepherd's candle on Gaudette Sunday in Advent...comes and surrounds us, around the austere and harsh example of this crude and unkempt prophet, John the Baptist. Our role is just like his: not to be the Messiah, but rather to point in the direction of the one who is. Like John the Baptist, our call and purpose is to bear witness to all who will listen that the darkest forces of the world are not as powerful as they claim or appear to be. That we might become more like John, "as sent from God". For that is, in fact, who we really are. We are, in fact, people sent from God as witnesses to testify to the Light, so that all might believe through him.

May God turn our hearts so that we may joyfully live our lives in the eternal presence, light and power of God as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.