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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
3rd Sunday of Advent/Year C
December 16, 2018
Text: Luke 3: 7-18

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. Some call it Gaudete (gow-day-tay) Sunday. Gaudete meaning “rejoice.” We relit the purple candles of Advent 1 and 2 and then lit the pink or rose colored candle, and declared it the candle of joy. Our church does not own rose paraments or vestments that help express that this Third Sunday of Advent gives us a break from the colors of the season. But the pink candle lit earlier and our readings for today lend themselves do give us a sort of joy filled pause during this almost solemn time of waiting and expectation. The prophet Zephaniah rings aloud, *“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!”* Canticle 9: The First Song of Isaiah joins in the chorus, *“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’s Letter to the Philippians seems to echo the minor theme for today, *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”*

But then John the Baptist enters in again. That wild and radical crazy man whose address was the desert. Or as a Facebook quote found on the Clergy Coaching Network post described him, “...the guy who is unlikely to show up in our Christmas pageants or on our greeting cards!” Still he does appear in each of the four gospels. Mark says that John wore clothes of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist and Matthew tells us that his diet consisted of locusts and wild honey. But Luke who gives us great detail of John’s birth and ministry does not bother to describe his dress or what he ate. But we can see him. Almost smell him, imagine him, as he made his way along the waters of the River Jordan quoting and shouting the words of Isaiah, *“Prepare the way of the Lord!”*

Now, I have experienced many an altar call in my time but John’s altar call for the repentance of sins was quite different to be sure. While today’s ministers most often wait patiently for the timid and lost sheep to approach the altar with those familiar words of invitation, “Whoever will, let them come.” But that was not John’s way! John showed little patience

because John was born into the world to prepare the way of the Messiah, the One who John said was much bigger than himself. John did not announce his coming timidly but with great excitement and with urgency. And John called *everyone*, no matter who they were, to task; the lowly and the mighty, the sinner and the righteous to a baptism of repentance.

Today, John shouts at the crowd, “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!*” ‘Don’t think yourself as safe just because you belong to Abraham’s family,’ John spouted. Don’t dare think of yourselves as privileged. There is no privilege. ‘God can create a new people from stones.’ Change your hearts! Change the way you are living! An axe is ready to cut you down if you don’t change your ways!’

The people began to ask him, “What then should we do?” To the crowds he said, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Share what you have. To the tax collectors, he said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Stop padding your pockets. To the soldiers he said: “Don’t extort money by threats or false accusations; be satisfied with your wages.” Don’t lie or bully others just to build up your nest egg either.

This was how John instructed them to prepare for the Messiah’s coming- by living out God’s commandment to love one’s neighbor. By treating others rightly and fairly.

John the Baptizer’s words in today’s gospel may sound startling but at the same time he means to get *our* attention as well, to stop us in our tracks. They are like the big billboards sprouting up in different locations across the nation that have caught a lot of attention in the media recently. In fact, there is one along I-44. Against a red background and with huge white letters it simply reads: LOVE.

John’s message calls out BEAR FRUITS WORTHY OF REPENTANCE. In other words: SHOW ONE ANOTHER LOVE. This is John’s call to metanoia; his call to the radical turning around of our lives, the change of mentality that we are invited to joyfully live into during this Advent season and every day. We are to mirror the God who created us. The God who first loved us. The God who, in Zephaniah’s song of praise, “*saves the lame, gathers the outcast, and transforms shame into praise.*”

Like those in the crowd we may ask, “What then should *we* do?”

And in essence, John repeats the message he gave those standing along the River Jordan; ‘Do you have a closet full of clothes? Then you have more than you need. Give some away. Do you have food? Then make an extra plate or fill a bag and give it to someone who needs it. Are you willing to share your resources? Then share who you are and what you have. In this age of instant gratification and competitiveness? Conduct yourselves with integrity, fairness, and truthfulness. Treat others rightly and fairly and honestly and respectfully, be other-centered. Live out your lives by living out God’s commandment to love. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love yourself.

As we fast approach the celebration of Christ’s birth there is a quote that I would like to share with you. As far as I can tell its author is anonymous. It reads:

*Want to keep Christ in Christmas?
Feed the hungry,
Clothe the Naked,
Forgive the guilty,
Welcome the unwanted,
Care for the ill,
Love your enemies,
And do unto others as you would have done unto you.*

These are these are fruits worthy of repentance. This are the fruits, the good fruits, we are to bear. And nothing but nothing, John says, gets us off the hook. Not our family backgrounds. Not our statuses or titles. Not the amount of money we have in the bank or the number of possessions we own.

Let us be grateful for John’s presence in this season of hope, peace, joy and love as we prepare for the Christ who came into the world at the first Advent and whose birth we will celebrate. And let us remember that the gifts that really count will not be found under our Christmas trees but in the joyful sharing and giving of our lives. We may wonder how we might, in a world so large, make any kind of difference at all and yet, one good deed,

one kind act can make all the difference in someone's world. Maybe after all, it could be the beginning of a whole new world for all.

Our King and Savior now draws near: **Come let us adore Him!**

Amen!