

Dateline Richmond . . . I hereby interrupt your daily news . . .

The worrisome, wearisome, ongoing stream of animosity and violence, the bigotry and outrageousness of the political system running amok is now paused—at least for a moment.

And in this pause—this momentary break from the angry discourse and the fears and threats,

I invite you to hear the sound of rejoicing!

...

Can you hear it? I know it's hard.

As if the current state of the world—political animosity, COVID-19, fear and angst about the future—is not enough,

The Season Advent—which begins today—is filled with

- Apocalyptic visions of the end times
- Wars and rumor of wars
- Prophetic denunciations
- Announcements of judgment

Yet today we hear John the Baptist proclaim good news.

Did you catch that last verse of our passage for this morning?

“He proclaimed the good news to the people!”

After calling the community a brood of vipers,
talking about the axe at the foot of the tree
and the winnowing fork ready for sorting,
then “with many exhortations,
he proclaimed the good news!”

Another translation says it this way:

“John used many such warnings
as he announced the Good News to the people.”

The question for today is: How do we get there?
How can we make the journey from Judgment to Joy?

The answer is: Advent

Advent is more than a season. Advent is a journey.
Like Mary and Joseph make a journey for the Birth of Christ, we make a journey.
Our journey is not on foot—or donkey—or horseback—or by train or plane.

Our journey is a cosmic, theological journey:
from Judgment to Joy,

We need perspective on difficulty, perspective on life events, and perspective on judgment.

My husband and I have been watching *The Crown* on Netflix. I think we are in season 3.

In one episode there is a sinkhole at a coal mine in Wales.

In and above the Welsh village of Aberfon, it has been raining hard for three weeks. After the raging rain stops, the inspectors go to visit the coal site.

As they are examining a small sinkhole, the ground beneath them rumbles. They barely escape the surrounding area as the sinkhole becomes a deep and wide crater.

Without notice, a slurry of coal slides rapidly down the mountain around 9:15 am.

The coal slide engulfs the local junior high school.

After the landslide stopped, rescuers began digging through the rubble. They found 5 dead teachers and 109 dead children. No survivors were found after 11 am.

Here was death, destruction, . . . disaster.

The queen sent her husband, Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh, to Aberfon as her representative. When he returned home from the community funeral service where the multitude of child-size coffins laid among the rubble in the streets, he said of the aftermath of the traumatic event:

“There was grief; there was anger; there was rage at the coal mining board, at government, at God. But even in their rage, the community didn’t smash things up and fight in the streets.”

The Queen asked, “What did they do?”

Philip answered, “They sang!”

This is perspective.

Christian people are called to sing in the midst of chaos and loss—especially in the Season of Advent.

The mixture of good news in the midst of chaos and judgment reminds me of the words spoken by the OT prophet Zephaniah

In the opening of the book, Zephaniah speaks for God, saying about his own community:

God will “make a clean sweep of the earth,
a thorough housecleaning.
Men and women and animals,
including birds and fish—will go”

But by Chapter 3, we hear Zephaniah speaking for God, saying:

Rejoice with all your heart...for God has taken away the judgments against you. God will save the lame and gather the outcast and turn their shame into praise (3:14, 19).

Amid the disgust, the sad state of affairs, the anticipated and realized destruction, we hear:

“Rejoice with all your heart!”

Same prophet—Zephaniah
Same God of the broken people.
Same conflicted human society.

But in the book of Zephaniah,
In this morning’s gospel passage from Luke,
and in the season we call Advent
there is this whiplash-like turn.

We turn on a dime from Judgement to Joy!

“Rejoice!” says Zephaniah
“Rejoice!” says John the Baptist
only moments after pronouncing judgment.

But here is the thing –
This sudden move has nothing to do with humans figuring out how to fix things.

Rejoice!
Not because we have found the solution—not because we have the answers.

Rejoice!
Because God is doing something to make the shift!

The same God who was angry enough in Zephaniah just two chapters earlier to eradicate life as we know it, makes the turn.

Who can say, exactly, how God makes this shift, or even why?

The Book of Zephaniah is pretty vague about the whole thing. But Zephaniah is convinced that God will indeed do something, a game-changing move.

And so, *rejoice!*

Likewise, John the Baptist proclaims the Good News:
Though the axe is at the foot of the tree and the winnowing fork is at hand—God is making a game changing move!

God is the game changer—not John!

You know what I mean by the game-changer, right?

The person or idea that effects a significant shift in the current manner of doing or thinking about something.

The Beatles were a game-changer.

After they came onto the scene music was not the same.

John announces the good news—

God, the game changer is coming!

At first blush--John's message is standard prophetic fare,
material that one would anticipate from any prophet worthy of the role.

In typical prophetic fashion, John gives is a clear warning about end times:

- Judgment is near
- Judgment will not be determined on the basis of religious, cultural, or ethnic identity but rather on the conduct of one's life

Then, about the hopes and expectations of a messiah, John says:

- One who is greater and who baptizes not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire is coming, and
- His coming will initiate the great judgment of the end times.

“Judgment is coming! Judgment is near!”

What is interesting here—and new—is that instead of shrinking back from John’s exhortations or being angered by John’s warnings—

let’s be honest, these are the most common reactions to the words of a prophet—fight and flight--

The crowd engages—the people lean in

John speaks his standard prophetic fare of doom and judgment.

But instead of running him out of town or running away, the people ask John a refreshingly pragmatic question:

"What then shall we do?"

And John answers.

The content of his advice is surprisingly ordinary.

He announced the impending judgment with some vim and vigor, but then he says simply:

- To the crowds: "Share."
- To the tax collectors: "Be fair."
- To soldiers: "Don't bully."

This is all great advice but one commentator said this sounds like

“the stuff of Kindergarten rather than stuff of the Apocalypse.”
And maybe that is Luke’s point—simplicity!

Fidelity to God and Faithfulness to God’s purposes does not have to be heroic.

Does the simplicity of the content of John's instruction strike you?

What about John’s audience that day in the wilderness?

They are not only ordinary; they are, *at best*,

- the riff raff: poor crowds with little to offer,
- despised tax collectors who profit from the oppression of their countrymen,
- mercenary soldiers known for extorting the vulnerable.

So while we are wondering,

“Why would this wilderness diatribe count as “*good news*”?”

Consider:

In a world that seems so broken, so divided, so impossible to fix and so resistant to change, we
(and even riff raff, tax collectors and mercenaries)

can still do things that matter!

What we do might not change the world! *But it still matters.*

We might not be able to measure the impact! *But it still matters.*

“My voice is soft, my body slow, my courage weak!” *But it still matters.*

What we do matters

because

even though we can never see the full impact of some of the smallest gestures or
the seemingly insignificant acts,

it is enough to do what we can,

trusting God to do that *oddly mysterious thing that Zephaniah seemed so convinced that God will do—save the lame and take away the outcast.*

And so, whether or not it feels like the right moment, *rejoice!*

More than 20 years ago, my husband was Scot new raft guide. His first paid gig was a one boat trip with a guy in a kayak supervising. He guided his party of 6 adventurers through some little rapids and then they approached the part of the river called pipeline. Scot had learned that when the water is high, you avoid Pipeline and go south. There was lots of water that day so instead of taking the Pipeline rapids, he went to the south side. Just past Manchester Bridge, he guided the raft on its course to go under the 14th street bridge. Lots of water means the boat moves fast. Scot could see the intended bridge passage ahead. He also saw a giant tree trunk running parallel to the water. It looked like it would cut across the rafters about under arm height. He paddled and steered hard to avoid the perpendicular trunk but could not. The 6 passengers in the raft went down two at a time boom, boom, boom—into the drink. Scot ducked and stayed in the raft. He and the kayak guy fished out all the customers. Later all 6 said it was the best part of the trip!

Rejoice!

It's a matter of perspective—how you look at God and the world around you.

I recently heard author James McBride talk about his book *Deacon King Kong*.

It's a book about race and religion and community, set against a backdrop of 1960s Brooklyn housing projects.

McBride wrote about a line of folks waiting for government cheese,

“this was fresh, rich, heavenly, succulent, soft, creamy, kiss-my-ass, cows-gotta-die-for-this, delightfully salty, moo-ass, good old white folks cheese, cheese to die for, cheese to make you happy, cheese to beat the cheese boss, cheese for the big cheese, cheese to end the world, cheese so good it inspired a line every first Saturday of the month.

The interviewer noted:

It would have been easy to have a scene about people in the projects waiting for government cheese be sad, and McBride made it joyful—not giving into the narrative that people who eat government cheese are sad and that the government cheese is pathetic.

Rejoice!

All around us, there are opportunities for us to follow the instructions of Zephaniah and John the Baptist. So wherever you are, whatever your fears about judgment and calamity, however uncertain the future appears, no matter what are your current circumstances—if you want to be faithful to God, Luke says:

1. Share
2. Be fair
3. Don't Bully

John may have come from the wilderness,

but the crowds came from towns, villages, and marketplaces.

According to John the Baptist, their homes and workplaces can be the arenas in which to offer basic behavior signifying their fidelity to God.

Likewise, our homes and workplaces can be arenas where witness to God's love and we openly rejoice in the salvation and justice God has planned for the world, even in the midst of chaos: "bearing fruits worthy of repentance."

In this Advent journey,

in light of the Good News--the game changer God who is coming in the person of Jesus,

as we are asked to move from Judgement to Joy, if John is willing to instruct, rather than condemn, the lowly poor, the corrupt tax collector, and the bare knuckled mercenary, then who is excluded from bearing fruits worthy of repentance?

The answer is no one.

John preaches to all, Jesus comes for all.

Rejoice!