



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, December 16, 2018

*The Third Sunday of Advent*

DONNA WESSEL WALKER

Zephaniah 3:14-20 | Canticle 9 | Philippians 4:4-7 | Luke 3:7-18

In the name of God. Amen.

I used to walk to and from work along Geddes Ave.; from time to time a car would stop and the people would ask if they were going the right way for the hospital. Sometimes I could say, "Yes! Just carry on straight ahead and turn right at the light, and then right again at the next light." Those directions were always welcome, and people drove off happy. But sometimes I'd have to say, "No, you need to turn around and go the other way." Those directions were not so welcome. It's not happy news, to hear that you need to turn around: it's frustrating to think how much time you've wasted going the wrong way, and if you pride yourself on your navigational skills it can bruise your ego to learn that those skills led you astray. Then you have to change your mindset as well as your direction, which is harder.

Changing your mind, turning around and going the other way: that's what repentance means. And that's what John the Baptist preached as he came out of the wilderness and engaged with the crowds of people who had come out to see and hear him. His baptism was a baptism of repentance: that's not a feel-good message. So it is a little surprising to hear Luke sum up John's exhortations as proclaiming "good news to the people." What's good news in John's message and baptism?

John offers, in the first place, the refreshing relief of honesty. There is great freedom in facing reality, even if it challenges your preconceived ideas or your cherished sense of yourself. John frees people from the weight of their pretensions and bigotry: forget about your ancestor Abraham! he cries. What's important about Abraham is what God did for him and through him: it's about God keeping covenant, not about your bloodlines. If God can create new children from stones, God can make anyone a child of God. John also frees people from their blindness and self-deception. Examine the fruit of your lives, he warns: is your life bearing good fruit or is it barren?

But John is not merely warning his hearers to flee from the wrath to come: that would be bad news, for what grain can escape the threshing floor or what tree avoid the axe already at the root? Implicit in John's message, rather, is a hope for change: however bad things may be now, they don't have to stay that way. John's baptism is to express

and reflect the change that God is working in those who come to him. John is not interested in people who come for a ritual cleansing that leaves their comfortable lives intact and themselves unchanged. John does not reward people who come for an empty gesture, no matter how far they have trekked out to the river bank. John is looking for the baptized to bear new, good fruit both in their hearts and in their daily lives. If we are not seeking that kind of change, then I'm afraid, friends, we are indeed among the vipers. John proclaims that God is cleaning away the falsehoods we've built in our lives with a real deliverance that can change us enough to be able to welcome the One who is coming with a winnowing fork in his hand. John tells us that we don't have to be chaff; we can by God's grace become kernels of nourishing grain.

Who were those people who trekked out to see John in the wilderness and to seek the baptism he gave? The groups of people who talk to John in this passage are not the down-and-outs, the poorest of the poor. They are people of some substance and power, even if modest. They are people comfortable enough to have two coats and ample food; they have jobs and responsibilities. But they were not big people with power to set policy and make institutional change. These folks all lived under the oppression of the Roman occupation, even the Roman soldiers who enforced it, far from their own homes. True, the Romans had brought peace across the Mediterranean, but it was the enforced peace of empire. That empire was full of big systems: military, political, economic and social systems that ran like the interlocking gears in some gigantic machine. Many people must have felt caught up in that machine, wondering if they were running their lives or if the machine were running them, oppressed by the fact that they could do nothing of any importance to change the system. We can feel like that, too: too small and too unimportant to have any major influence or make any big impact. We do not live in a tyrannical empire, to be sure, but we do live in a large, complicated society with problems too big for any of us, with decisions being made far from us and beyond our reach. We can feel hopeless because we feel helpless.

Yet John challenges that people can do more than they think. When they ask him, "what should we do?" he has answers for them. Those who are comfortable are to share

their wealth; the tax collectors are to stop overcharging; the soldiers are to stop exercising their power with petty meanness. They are to turn from lives of selfish indifference and casual cruelty and go in another direction, to treat others in humane and just ways. It's interesting that all three of John's answers have to do with money in one way or another. Does this mean that money is the only thing that matters or that John focused particularly on money and greed? I think not; rather, our use of money is a very direct way to measure what matters to us. Money can be a metonymy for the rest of our dealings with others: are we willing to share and to be fair? If people renewed by baptism lived generously and were just in their dealings, what would be different about that great machine that we're all caught up in?

John does not speculate on earthly results except insofar as they show what changes have happened in people's lives. John is focused on the One Who is Coming, and the greater work that One will do: baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John calls us to repentance and new ways of living that will change our direction as we live out the deliverance God has wrought in us. The Holy One is coming: as we wait we can live his way. Turning to the Holy One means we can await his coming with rejoicing.

That is the rejoicing the prophets and Paul give us in the other readings today. Over and over they show us reasons to rejoice:

God has removed judgment and delivered us from everything we fear.

God strengthens our hands so that we draw water from the well of salvation with joy.

The Lord is near: both with us now and soon to come.

Therefore we can let our gentleness be known by everyone: we don't need to enrich ourselves at others' expense or puff ourselves up by cruelty to others.

God's mercy calls us to turn around and go in the direction of God: "I will bring you home; I will gather you; I will change your shame into praise."

Rejoice always: that phrase gives us the name for this, the third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete or Rejoice Sunday. This rejoicing is not some happy-clappy, carefree, mindless celebration. Rather this joy knows that the call to repentance is good news. This joy has been through repentance: this joy has seen the dangers of going in the wrong direction and has turned around; this joy has sorrowed over the barren tree and begun to bear fruit; this is the joy of one who has been lost and now has been called to come home. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!

Amen.