

Third Sunday of Advent
Sermon Text: Luke 3:7-18
Related text: Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7
Date Preached: December 13, 2009

Grace to you and peace from God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

What then should we do?

Many of the members of this congregation as well as our council members have been devoting numerous hours of time and energy focusing on what we should do in response to our denominations decisions to change ministry policies. Today members of our congregation will be given a vote on how to support the ministries of our wider church. Indeed, what then should we do?

Those who have gathered to hear John preaching repentance of sins: the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers are asking the same question. “What should we do?” These may seem unrelated. Then again, they are not all that unrelated.

Let’s consider two specific ways as to how the readings of Scripture relate to us today. The first has to do with the word, rejoice.

The season of advent invites us to look ahead with hope, and that hope is in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rejoice.

With the coming of the Lord, there is not simply pie in the sky things will get better hope. Rather, the hope and the reason for our rejoicing is that with the coming of the Lord, there is belonging.

That is the message in the reading from Zephaniah. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart states the prophet,” why? “The Lord our God will bring us home at the time when I gather you;” To put it more clearly, with God you belong. Our home is with God and God’s home is with us. And God does not evict his people. Not only do we belong to God but we belong to each other.

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Philippi a word of thanks for their financial and prayerful support of his ministry. He invites them to rejoice with him, not because they gave him a gift. He invites them to rejoice in the Lord, who has brought them together.

Rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is near. Let us rejoice together as one people of God. That is Paul’s message, not only to Philippi, but to us.

Now when it comes to John the Baptist's preaching, the word rejoice does not appear. In fact, being called a "brood of vipers" does not lend oneself to a rejoicing mindset.

Yet even for those first listeners of John's preaching, there is reason to rejoice. John the Baptist points his listeners to the one who is coming after him. He points them to Jesus who is more powerful than he. John points them to Jesus who will bring them into God's family in baptism. In so doing, there will be a place for his original audience to belong.

Rejoice for the Lord has come and has saved us. The one more powerful than John is Jesus. Christ our savior and Lord, born of a virgin, who dies a criminal's death, conquer death's power to separate us from God. God's community cannot be separated from the one who created us.

That work is done. We are saved. Yet the ramifications and what it means to rejoice lives on. For Christ death has formed us into the community of the baptized that for two thousand years has been called the church.

The ministry of the church has always been to proclaim this good news of Jesus. The ministry of

the church is to baptize and commune. Such a ministry is one that continually welcomes all people into this church and continually feeds the believers of the church.

Linked together in Christ through baptism and nourished in our faith frees us to explore all the many ways we can build up the community of this church, both in its widest expression which includes non-Lutheran Churches as well as our congregation.

The scriptures bid us to treat one another kindly and with love. That is one thing we can do individually. As individuals we can come to the celebrations of life passages such as weddings and funerals to offer our love and support for newly married couples and those who grieve.

When pooling our individual resources together as a community, there are opportunities to support the mission of God that happens beyond our walls.

Thanks to the response of this congregation, SPY purchased gifts for boys and girls at the Glade Run campus in Zelienople, Pa. A third of the youth at that campus will have gifts this Christmas because us.

Additionally, with the collection of shirts, underwear and socks for the men's mission and the Christmas meals and gifts for families we've adopted reflect what God can do through us.

The same things hold true across our synod and across our ELCA. Participating in those wider communities allow clean water to be provided in undeveloped communities, children to be educated, future pastors to be trained, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be spread through missionaries. Can we participate in different ways? Sure. But we cannot do this apart from a community.

In this advent season, let us rejoice in the coming of the Lord, who binds us together in love for the sake of a world in need of the good news of Jesus.

AMEN.