

SERMON
3rd Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2009

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Psalmody: Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

As some of you already know, before I went to seminary, I worked in the Jewelry business. My last job was with a family owned company that had 6 stores in the Minneapolis/St Paul area. I was the manager of one of the stores in a local mall. We did a little over a million dollars a year in business and had about 13 employees.

Once in a while the owner would come by for a visit. He would usually call ahead of time and let me know that he was stopping in. Now, as the manager, I never really looked forward to his coming. It would mean “judgment time”. My employees and I would try and hurry up and make sure everything was in order before he arrived.

But no matter how hard we tried to meet his expectations, it was never good enough. He would always find something wrong. The salespeople were not greeting customers fast enough, the glass had fingerprints on it, the inventory was not displayed according to his liking, sales figures were not up to his expectations.

Every time he came, I would get a knot in my stomach knowing that I was going to be judged as not doing a very good job.

Then, sometimes he would show up without even notifying us first. That was even more stressful. All the managers would try and call and warn each other when he was on the move so that we could at least have some lead time to prepare. At any rate, whenever he came to visit, there was never any good news. He was never satisfied with our performance.

And yet he never gave us any hope either. Oh, he would tell us that if we just worked more hours, pressed a little harder to close the sale, and give fewer discounts, we could reach our goal and then be rewarded.

However, he made sure that the goals were just out of our reach. In a sense he would constantly be setting us up for failure. Eventually people would quit. He would then hire new people at a lower salary and promise them the same thing.

Now, I know that not all companies are run like this, but that was my experience. That's probably why that after working for him for just under three years, I had the third highest seniority out of over 50 employees.

I thought about this experience after reading the Gospel lesson for today. John the Baptist talks about someone coming. He also talks about judgment. This someone, of course, was much different than my boss.

This someone was coming to judge, yes, but also to bring hope. John the Baptist called it GOOD news. That's something that I never experienced from my boss in the jewelry business.

So what is this good news that John is talking about? Well, let's listen again to his words. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Well, this doesn't seem like good news, especially at Christmastime when everyone is supposed to be saying nice things to each other.

But that's exactly why it's here. You see, we cannot ignore John the Baptist and his call for repentance. We cannot reach the babe in a manger unless we pass through John the Baptist no more than we can reach the resurrection without going through the crucifixion.

Before we meet the charming infant smiling in the straw, we are confronted by the terrifying figure of John the Baptist. For we can't experience the Joy of Christmas unless we first encounter the repentance preached by John. That's what the season of Advent is all about.

We all know that there are a lot of people who never come to worship except on Christmas and Easter. I can say that to you, because you are not them. When this is the case however, they miss all together the message of John the Baptist.

So why is it that so many people want to sideline John the Baptist during our Christmas celebration? Is it because he lived on locust and wild honey while people today are more concerned about stuffed turkeys and pecan pie? Or, is it because he dressed in camel's skin while we look to dress in the latest fashions from Vogue and GQ magazine?

I believe that more than that, he tells it like it really is. He tells us that all of us are rotten sinners. All of us fall into the category of being part of the "Brood of Vipers." "Not one of us is worthy to even untie the thongs on the sandals of our Lord," John said.

Now this way of looking at things can do one of two things. It can drive us to despair and hopelessness. Or it can drive us to repent and kneel down in front of the babe in a manger which in time will become the foot of a cross.

You see, this is what the Law does. It condemns us. The judgment has already been made. We are all guilty as charged. There is nothing we can do that is going to save us. It must take an act from outside of us.

During the Nazi occupation of Holland, the Nazis had planned to deport Jewish children to concentration camps. But there was also a Dutch resistance group that had made it their mission to do what they could to save these children. Along with the children, they numbered about three hundred. They had gathered together and were hiding.

What they did not know was that someone in their own group had betrayed them to the Nazis. Therefore, they were found and taken to a detention center. There they heard that they would be taken, not to a concentration camp, but instead, directly to a crematorium where they would be killed.

When the day to be taken away came, both the Christian resistance leaders and the Jewish children boarded the same cattle cars together, to share their common fate. The trip lasted a few days.

One morning, just after sunrise, the train stopped and word was given that they were to get out of the train. They got out, expecting to find themselves surrounded by guards.

But instead, they were standing in the middle of a pasture. They were not in Germany, but in Switzerland. You see, the train, while it was taking them to their death, had been taken over and liberated during the night. As a result, these 300 people were not victims of the death they expected. Instead, they were offered new life.

These children and resisters were not capable of overthrowing the German guards themselves. They needed an outside intervention.

This is what we prepare for during this Advent Season. It is a time that we realize that we can in no way save ourselves. Therefore, as we repent, we prepare for a time when God intervenes in history in a miraculous way. God comes into the world as a human, born to a poor lowly unwed teenager.

But why would God do something like this? we might ask. It can be summed up with one word; “love,” “love”.

A group of young children were recently interviewed and asked the question; “What is love?” The answers were quite insightful. One child said; “Love is when my mommy makes a cup of coffee for my daddy and takes a little taste before she gives it to him to make sure that it tastes okay.”

Another said; “Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you’ve left him alone all day.” A little girl said; “You really shouldn’t say, ‘I love you’ unless you really mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot, because people forget.”

One boy said, “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

And finally, 7 year old Bobby said; “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen. Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

This is the love that comes to us as an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. This is the love that Jesus brings into our broken and hurting world.

But it doesn’t end there, does it? The coming of the Christ child demands a response. In our Gospel reading, the crowds were asking John; “What then should we do?”

John answered; “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the tax collectors he said; “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” To the soldier, John said; “Do not extort money from anyone by threats of false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Do you see a common theme here? John is talking about sharing. John is talking about not being greedy – taking more than what you need. These words address head on the culture of materialism and consumerism that we live in. Therefore, these words point directly to you and me.

An old Jewish folktale bears witness to what John was talking about.

There were once two brothers who farmed together. They shared equally in all of the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own storehouse. One of the brothers was married and had a large family. The other was single and lived by himself.

One day, the single brother thought to himself: “It’s not fair that we divide the grain so evenly. My brother has many mouths to feed, while I have but one. I know what I will do! I will take a sack of grain from my storehouse each evening and put it in my brother’s storehouse.”

So each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain and put it in his brother’s storehouse without being seen.

Now the married brother also thought to himself: “It’s not fair that we divide the grain so evenly. After all, I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I will do! I will take a sack of grain from my storehouse each evening and put it in my brother’s storehouse.”

So each night when it was dark, he too carefully carried a sack of grain and put it in his brother’s storehouse.

This went on for weeks. And since neither brother knew what the other was doing, each morning they were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they still had just as many.

But one night they met each other halfway between their storehouses, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. They dropped their sacks and embraced, and in tears celebrated their love for one another.

And God looked down from heaven, saw the two brothers embracing, and said: “Blessed be the field where these two brothers are standing and embracing.”

And many years later – so says the legend – King Solomon built the Holy Temple on the very same ground, that it might become a house of love and peace and blessing to all nations and peoples.

Our Lord is coming. Do not fear. Repent, and place your trust in the hope that is to come. Let us fall to our knees and welcome him. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.