

The Third Sunday of Advent, Year C
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
December 12, 2021
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Canticle 9
Phillipians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Repent, Rejoice, and Serve

Happy third Sunday of Advent.

Every year during the four Sundays of Advent, no matter which year it is or which gospel we are reading, we have the same pattern of gospel readings.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we have a gospel text that reminds us to stay alert.

On the second and third Sundays of Advent, we have gospel texts about John the Baptizer.

And on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we have a gospel text about either Mary or Joseph.

This is the pattern every year.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, sure enough, we have a second gospel text in a row about John the Baptizer.

We also have a three-year cycle of readings known as the Revised Common Lectionary. We as the Episcopal Church along with a number of other liturgical churches all use it. It has been our Sunday lectionary in the Episcopal Church since 2006.

What does this mean?

It means that each year on the first Sunday of Advent, as we start a new church year, a new liturgical year, we begin with a new gospel companion for the year.

So, it also means that as we repeat the Advent gospel pattern: stay alert, John, John, Mary or Joseph, we get the perspective of the gospel of the particular year on those subjects and characters.

In the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, we spend Year A with Matthew, Year B with Mark, and Year C with Luke. Are you wondering, what about John? I love John. Why doesn't John get John's own year? Why is it only a three-year cycle not a four-year one?

John's gospel is always our companion during Eastertide. It is an Easter gospel. John also makes special guest appearances at other times during the three years. A particularly important guest appearance is coming up at Christmas when once again we will hear the beautiful, stirring prologue of John.

Why does this matter?

Each of the four canonical gospels takes a unique approach. All four of them give us the story of Jesus, yet each has its own vantage point and particular emphases.

Part of the focus of each gospel and its other characteristics are determined by the most pressing concerns of the community that composed it.

For example, the most pressing concern for the community that composed Matthew—a community dealing with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the collapse of an entire system—their question and concern was, “How do we face change?” The key question for the community that composed Mark was, as a community moving through persecution, “How do we move through suffering?” The leitmotif of John's gospel centers on the question, “How do we receive joy?” And the orienting question for the community that composed Luke, our companion this year in Year C, is, “How do we mature in service?”

Many times, we ask the first three questions and fail to ask and live the fourth. How do we face change? How do we move through suffering? Where's my joy? And we wanna say, “Joy, joy, joy,” and sometimes forget that the point of the other three is to mature in service.

In keeping with these characteristics or key questions, the four canonical gospels present John the Baptizer in different ways, showcasing different attributes or characteristics.

Luke, as we examined last week, is the only gospel to describe John the Baptizer as the child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, indicating that he was a child of the priestly class, a person of some status and privilege in first-century Judaism.

Yet, last week as this week, we find this child of privilege in the wilderness, the desert, and today, still in the desert, we find him with his feet planted in the mud of the Jordan River.

Last week we heard that he went to the wilderness, and then he heard God's voice. This week we see what he does in response to hearing God's call to him.

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, John the Baptizer calls people to repentance, as he does in our gospel passage today. He calls people to repent, to amend their way of living, to go in a different direction. The Hebrew verb we translate into English as "repent" literally means to turn around, make a U-turn, do a 180.

Repent. Go another way.

Repentance isn't the same as remorse although we may be remorseful for how we have been behaving.

Repentance isn't the same as regret although we may be regretful over how we have handled things or treated people.

Repentance means changing how we are living. The changes that we make are the fruits of repentance.

Repentance can bring difficulties and challenges as we establish new practices and patterns. I'm told it takes at least twenty-one days to form a new habit. And let's face it: it may take twenty-one days to form it, but it only takes a very few days to let a good habit go. I think you know what I mean.

Repentance and the changes that accompany it can also bring a great sense of purpose and liberation and joy. And liberation and joy permeate all our readings today.

Zephaniah says the children of Zion should rejoice. His message is to those in exile or about to be in exile. And he says, don't give up. God has not forgotten them. God will bring them home.

And Paul, our patron, writes that God is near, and so the followers of Jesus in Philippi should rejoice and not give up. He writes them a beautiful letter of consolation. He knows whereof he speaks. He writes to them from prison, and even in prison, he still knows joy. Tell God your desires and requests, Paul says,

with your thanksgivings. Don't worry about anything and pray about everything. Paul assures the Philippians and us that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

In Luke's gospel, people are responding to John the Baptizer's message. He invites them to participate in a ritual bath in the flowing water of the Jordan River to mark their intention to live differently.

We have become accustomed to understanding this ritual bath as baptism. And in a certain way, it is. It is a marker, an indicator, of something changing. Luke's gospel calls it "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." It is not, however, the same as the sacrament of baptism as we now understand it and practice it.

It is not, for example, the baptism that Aubrey, our catechumen at St Paul's, is preparing for at the Easter vigil as she learns history and doctrine and examines her faith story in community.

The baptism of John is important. And it is very close to something already in place in the religious culture of Judaism in his day, the mikveh bath. A river was a very desirable location for such a ritual bath.

It's important to note, however, that the purpose of mikveh baths was for purification and preparation before participation in other religious acts. It was not understood to be for the removal of sins.

It's also important to note that because John's baptism was happening in a river in the wilderness, everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, could come close and participate. It was not a regulated space of the religious establishment.

Archeology reveals that the practice of purification of human bodies and ritual vessels was pervasive in Jerusalem in the first century. There were many small mikveh pools in private homes. And there were large mikveh pools as would have been needed for the many people visiting the temple in Jerusalem. You've heard of them before; pools like Siloam and Bethesda, about which we learn in John's gospel.

The practice of mikveh baths as rituals of purification continues in the Judaism of our day although these days almost always indoors in pools created specifically for this purpose.

In this account from Luke that we have today, how do people respond, all these people who can come down to the riverside?

They incline their hearts to John's message. They agree that the times they are living in are challenging, perplexing, even dire, that maybe the end is coming even sooner than they thought.

They go down to the river to pray and to mark their intention to amend their living through this ritual of purification, this practice of starting again afresh and anew. And then they ask, "Now what?"

Remember, the orienting question of Luke's gospel is, "How do we mature in service?"

The great big undifferentiated crowd then begins to say to John, "Alright. We're on board. And what should we *do* to show fruits worthy of repentance? How can we demonstrate that we are amending our lives and changing our ways? Break it down for us, Brother John."

And he does: everyone who has more than they need should share with those who don't have enough. Tax collectors should only collect what the Roman imperial government requires: no adding on extra handling charges that went into their own pockets. Soldiers should not extort money from anyone; they shouldn't threaten people or accuse anyone falsely in order to prompt a payoff; they should be satisfied with their wages.

John gives them ways to mature in service to God and community even while they are still entangled in systems and institutions.

It isn't a shocker that loads of regular people went out to the wilderness and down to the Jordan River to listen to this son of the priestly class gone wild.

It is surprising that people deeply implicated in the aims and structures of empire were also there. Maybe it's those folks in particular that John calls names: "brood of vipers," for example. Who were they?

Tax collectors: Jews collecting money on behalf of the Roman occupiers from other Jews and famous for pocketing service charges. Remember Zaccheus?

Soldiers: conscripts from all over the Roman Empire from many different cultures and countries deployed in this backwater called Palestine. Far from home. Restless. Bored. Overworked. Underpaid.

This means that John's ministry, like that of Jesus, drew in all kinds of people. The challenging but comforting message of John resonates with that of Jesus.

The lives and histories and ministries of John the Baptizer and Jesus overlap and intersect in many ways. They are cousins: more about that next week. They hear God's voice. They lay everything on the line. They engage every constituency of people they encounter. They run afoul of the authorities. They are arrested. They are executed.

And they both still call us. In some ways, for sure, they call us out. They provide a standard that helps us see where we need to alter course and amend our lives. But they also call *to* us. Get ready. Live now. Find your purpose. Figure out how to serve, not in some far-off dream world but in this one where you are.

Both John and Jesus invite everyone, including us, to live lives of purpose in which we ourselves become proof of a loving, living, lifegiving, liberating God. We are the proof.

This is a challenging invitation, and it is good news. There is a way back home. God is with us. This life is worth living. And so, rejoice!