

III Advent

December 13, 2015

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Philippians 4:4-7

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

“What then should we do?”

Zephaniah (3:14,17) – A prophet in 7th century BC, proclaimed “rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!; the Lord God is in your midst.”

Isaiah (12:6) – Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Paul (Phil 4:4) – Rejoice in the Lord always.

All express profound joy over their experience of the Lord's presence.

Then there is John, who sets a very different tone from joy and exaltation. People had better get ready for God, because he isn't happy. John called the crowds a 'brood of vipers' trying to escape the impending judgment of God. He used what we could accurately describe as theological verbal abuse. His harsh language and fiery prophecy convinced the people who gathered at the Jordan River to hear him, that vengeance was about to fall upon the whole world, and if they would listen to him and do as he said, they could escape the wrath of God. He called for heart-felt repentance. Only that would prevent them being 'cut down and thrown into the fire'.

(Synthesis) “While John and Jesus both preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, their manner of life and style of ministry were very different. John's secluded life in the desert wilderness included a strange diet and dress. Jesus ate and drank whatever was set before him, wore ordinary clothing, and traveled openly among the people. John told his disciples to fast; Jesus prepared a feast for thousands. John proclaimed that the only way to get right with God was by producing fruits worthy of repentance. Jesus said that we should come to God as a little child. John preached a God of unrelenting judgment; Jesus taught about a God of unlimited grace. John preached to sinners; Jesus hung out with them and ate with them. John seemed to scare people with his fiery preaching and uncompromising apocalyptic message—Jesus healed them. John understood that he was to prepare the way for the Messiah; but the fact that Jesus was more concerned with healing and *reconciliation* than *repentance* led John to question whether Jesus was really the One whom he was called to proclaim (Lk. 7:18-20).”

Jesus, unlike the prophets who came before him, aimed his preaching not at ensuring victory for the nation Israel against her pagan adversaries, but at making Israel what God called her to be, namely, the light of the world. John foretold that ‘someone else’ was coming to kindle a new fire in us, a divine fire that would inspire us to live to a higher standard than trying to protect ourselves from divine vengeance.

In our Advent Wreath, this third Sunday of Advent is marked with the lighting of a pink candle, differentiating it from the blue candles for the other three weeks of Advent. The pink color marks this to be Gaudete Sunday (gow-day-tay), meaning Rejoice Sunday. It is not an accident that the call to ‘rejoice’ is offered by our pink candle, and in our other readings this morning, to offset the hellfire and brimstone preaching of John. The prophets Zechariah and Isaiah rejoice that God is in our midst. Paul rejoices that God has sent Jesus to us. We rejoice in that holy birthday on a Christmas morning 2,015 years ago.

In our spirits we already feel this call to rejoice, don’t we? Despite the crowds on the roads and in the stores, we feel joy. Despite the hectic race to get everyone on our list just the right gift, we feel excitement. Hearing the same old Christmas songs by Bing Crosby and Dean Martin on the radio, and singing carols that we know by heart, we feel the sense of this being sacred time, when the possibilities for divine mystery are real.

For me, the joy, excitement, sensing of the sacred, are not something that creeps up and surprises me on Christmas morning. The experiences of the mystery of Christmas are not squeezed into a moment, or a few hours. The joy, excitement, and sensing of the sacred are contained in the journey toward Christmas.

Examples: Ruth buying coffee for anxious, frazzled shoppers behind her in line at Starbucks. Me hearing laughter of children at puppet show of John. We can be a peaceful presence to others; and by carrying that presence to others, we will feel that presence in ourselves.

I have discovered that the ‘feeling of Christmas’ is alive and well only if I hold onto the expectation, day by day, that I will see God in the journey.

As you journey through the physical preparations to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ at Christmas, rejoice in the Lord for the joy, for the excitement, for the sense of sacred time, that are the true meaning of Christmas.

Amen.