

"REJOICE IN THE LORD"  
Zephaniah 3:14-20    Luke 3:7-20  
December 16, 2018    Advent Three  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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Over thirty years ago my family and I went to a concert at the York Fair. The Fair Grandstand is certainly no United Center, but they always had a great line up of concerts. My folks, my sisters, and I had good seats- near the stage. We were very excited to see the star, Reba McIntire. As we took our seats we complained about having to sit through the opening act- some guy we had never heard of. We went to the concert to hear Reba, not some guy with one song on the radio.

Perhaps you have heard of Reba's opening act- his name is Garth Brooks. And he blew us away! He gave one of the best concerts I have ever seen. He was energetic, funny, humble, and he really connected with the audience. I think he had two encores and got a standing ovation. When he left the stage we were disappointed and actually forgot about the one we had come to see.

Reba's concert was great too- but we never forgot that young man, just starting out in his career. Garth Brooks is now the best-selling solo artist in the United States. Worldwide, he is second only to the Beatles in album sales. His stadium tours sell out in minutes. Just a few weeks ago his concert at the Notre Dame Stadium was broadcast on television.

After the concert my family and I talked about how secure Reba must be in her own talent- to allow Garth Brooks to be her opening act, even at the beginning of his career. He was back at the York Fair about ten years later- this time as the headliner. That concert was just as much fun as the first one. I have no memory of his opening act.

I have been to some concerts where the opening act was atrocious and others that were pretty good. But I have never seen an opening act like Garth Brooks.

Advent has an opening act too- and he is also a surprise. His name is John. He has peculiar dietary and fashion habits and he lives and preaches in the wilderness. John usually shows up in our scripture readings during the second and third weeks of Advent. Just as we are getting excited about gifts and trees and Christmas carols; just as we start looking around for the baby in the manger, we walk into

church and here is John- a full grown adult standing on the riverbank in the middle of nowhere ranting and raving about fire and axes.

John's birth story is almost as miraculous as that of his cousin Jesus. John's parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, were getting up in years. The great sadness of their lives was that they had never been able to have a baby. So imagine their surprise when God's angel, Gabriel, told Zechariah that Elizabeth would get pregnant and they would have a son.

Zechariah was so flummoxed that he blurted out, "Are you kidding me? Do you know how old we are?" Gabriel didn't appreciate the old man's disbelief and struck him mute for the next nine months. When John was born Zechariah found his voice again and he sang out,

*"And you my child, you will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

As we are on our merry way to Christmas, John stops us in our tracks. He wakes us up and he doesn't sugar coat his message. He is preparing the way for the One who is more powerful. He knows he is the opening act and he claims that job with gusto.

I find it interesting to note where John is- in the wilderness. He was in the middle of nowhere and if the people wanted to hear him they had to travel with some difficulty to get there; they had to make an effort to find him. He wasn't in the middle of town. He wasn't in the Temple- which is where you would expect to find a preacher. He wasn't easily accessible and yet he drew pretty good crowds. Apparently the people were searching for something they couldn't find in the temple. And those who stayed within the safe confines of the religious establishment would never hear his message.

*John "knew the old world was about to end and a new world was spinning toward him, carried in the arms of God's chosen one. John proclaimed that Someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough to simply hang around waiting for him to arrive. It was time to get ready, to prepare the way, so that when he came he could walk a straight path right to their doors." (1)*

John knew that his message was good news and that *"message lit him up like a bonfire in the wilderness. People were drawn to him, apparently, not only because of who he was and what he said but also because of what he offered them- a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were someone else and start over again, by allowing him to wash them off."*

And his sermon? That was a doozy too. "You brood of vipers!" How's that for a Christmas card greeting? He warns the people gathered around him not to think they get a pass because of their religious pedigree. He threatens them with the image of an ax at the base of a tree. *"If you don't start bearing good fruit you will be cut down and thrown into the fire!"*

This is a hard message to hear and still the people came in droves to hear him preach. This is a hard message and still they walked many miles, leaving behind the comforts of home, and stood on the muddy riverbank listening to a Wildman. Instead of running away when he challenged them, they asked, "What do we need to do?"

Here is where John really shines a light on the One who is coming, instead of saying, "Well, you need to pray more, worship more, give more money to the Temple, fast more often, and beg God for forgiveness- he told the people, "If you have two coats, give one away." To the tax collectors working for Rome he said, "No more extortion- collect only what is required by the law." And to the mercenary soldiers he said, "No more shakedowns, no blackmail, don't abuse your power and be content with your wages." This was revolutionary! When they asked what to do he gave them simple instructions- all within their ability to accomplish, but not without possible costs to themselves. He basically told them what we learn in kindergarten: Share. Be Fair. Don't bully.

John doesn't tell the crowd that they must leave their comfortable lives behind and move to the wilderness. He doesn't tell the tax collectors to abandon or betray their employer, Rome. And he doesn't tell the soldiers to become pacifists.

*"Instead he points them to the very places in which they already live and work, love and laugh, struggle and strive, and suggests that these places are precisely where God calls them to be, where God is at work in them and through them for the sake of the world." (2)*

Not too much later, when Jesus made his appearance and started preaching he echoed John's words when he said that people would be judged by what they did or didn't do for the least important people in town. John and Jesus both preached a

message of transformation- about a change from the way things are to the way they are supposed to be.

This season of Advent is not for the naïve. If we didn't spend some time in the wilderness with John every year we might come to think Christmas is only about a sweet baby. Without John's harsh words we might think Christmas is only about cookies and gifts and forget that it is all about repentance; about becoming the people God created us to be; about reaching out to all of God's children.

John's presence during the season of Advent is so important because he refuses to allow us anywhere near the manger of Jesus until we stop to think about what his birth really means for the world. What the birth of Jesus really means is that God has come to town in a whole new way. What it means is that God has moved into our neighborhood. What it means is that God has come to be with us as one of us, wearing our skin and breathing our air.

Jesus came to change us. John didn't tell people to do good deeds so that Jesus would love them. He said, "accept the fact that Jesus already loves you and when you really, truly believe that you will not be able to keep yourself from doing good things for others." John's message wasn't meant to scare people into following Jesus. It was intended to show them what true life looks like. And it looks like people caring for each other.

*Tom Long writes, "Repentance is impossible unless one is given a new way of perceiving what is true and real. If John the Baptist had only cried, 'Repent!' he would have been wasting his breath. People do not simply turn away from one way of life; they do so when they turn **toward** something deeper and truer. John gives them the reason for repenting when he also cries out, 'For the kingdom of heaven has come near!' The nearness of the reign of God in Jesus is the gift of total healing for the world. John is preaching the message that, by the power of God, the beloved community has drawn near, that the long-sought salvation and peace that people have yearned for is now a reality."*

John, being a prophet, carried the same message that the prophets carried before him. In our text from the Old Testament prophet, Zephaniah, we see something we don't see every day. A happy prophet. Although, we have to acknowledge that he doesn't speak of joy until after he has spoken of God's anger at God's people.

In chapter one God's anger is aimed at the people. God says, "I will destroy everything on the earth." Then in chapter two God's anger is aimed at the enemies of Israel. At the beginning of chapter three God takes aim at the officials, judges, prophets, and priests of the chosen people. And what has aroused such anger?

Continual violation of God's call for social justice. God's anger is all about the ways in which the people of God mistreat others in their community. Zephaniah speaks God's words of judgment because of corruption, injustice, and oppression. He points to the arrogance of the leaders who trample others to get what they want.

*Prophets, like John and Zephaniah, "say what no one wants to hear, what no one wants to believe. Prophets point in directions no one wants to look. They hear God when everybody else has concluded God is silent. They see God where nobody else would guess God is present. They feel God. Prophets feel God's compassion for us, God's anger with us, God's joy in us. They dream God's dreams and utter wake up calls; they hope God's hopes and announce a new future;*

*they will God's will and live it against all odds. Prophets sing God's song and sometimes interrupt the program with a change of tune."* (Deborah A. Block)

So even as he speaks God's words of judgement, Zephaniah also speaks of a new future, a future that is possible, a future of joy. He looks beyond judgment and punishment to restoration and new life. God's prophets believe, with every fiber of their being, that God can and will transform the world. They also know that this transformation will occur only if God's faithful do their part to make it happen. If God was just going to make it all happen there would be no need for prophets. Someone has to speak God's word and remind the people that their relationship with God also includes their relationships with other people. Prophets remind us that everything we do or think or feel has to do with God. Every other person has to do with God.

Prophets were persecuted because they called the leaders to account. John first ended up in prison and then with his head on a platter because he called out the hypocrisy and sinfulness of the king. Transformation can come with a great cost- not everyone wants the world to change. Some are profiting very nicely from the way things are- almost always at the expense of others. Injustice usually provides fat bank accounts for a few while many are left hungry, homeless, alone, in danger, and out of work.

God's presence is disturbing- it upsets the status quo and forces us to wake from our complacent habits. It undermines hypocrisy and indifference. Almost every single time God's prophets confront the people with God's anger in scripture it is because of social inequality; it is because of the ways they are mistreating God's children.

The same could be said of our world today.

- Tearing children away from their parents and locking them in cages.
- Refusing to allow people to seek asylum in our country.
- Marking the anniversary of the massacre of little children in Sandy Hook, CT with no change in our gun laws.
- A rapist getting off with a small fine and no jail time.
- Rampant racism in all parts of our society including: the suppression of the votes of people of color; the deaths of innocent black men and women at the hands of police; the prison industrial complex which targets mostly young black men.

We, in the United States, like the people who listened to John and

Zephaniah, need to turn away from our former lives, twisted by alienation and violence, and turn toward deeds of compassion, justice, and love. We need to turn around, turn toward God, and get to work restoring relationships.

We are the recipients of an unexpected, undeserved, inexplicable gift- the grace and mercy of God wrapped in human flesh- the Holy infant, the Rebel Jesus, the Risen Christ. He is a reminder to us that God is with us, God has always been with us, God will always be with us.

In this season of Advent the opening act has done his job. He has told us what we need to do. Let's get ready for the main attraction!

Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *"Wherever the Way May Lead," Barbara Brown Taylor, from HOME BY ANOTHER WAY, Cowley. 1999. Pp. 12-13.*
- *David Lose, Advent 3 C: "Beyond Scolding", December 11, 2018*