

So, which is it: “Rejoice!” or “Flee!”? Shall we be afraid of the wrath to come? or put aside all worries? The Lord is near. Are we to expect the unquenchable fire? or the peace of God that passes all understanding?

The prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah urge us to sing, shout, cry aloud with rejoicing. The Apostle Paul would have us rejoice in the Lord always, no matter what the circumstances. But here stands John the Baptist, brandishing an ax, insulting our mamas: *You offspring of snakes!*

Oh, my! Zephaniah, Isaiah, Paul and John, all four, really do go over the top; they are nothing if not passionate. Have we come out this cold, rainy/sleety morning only to be confused by mixed messages from these wildly enthusiastic prophets and teachers?

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us,*” indeed. Perhaps we really should be more careful what we pray for!

In the world outside, commercial Christmas is stirring. Merchants and economic forecasters are on the tiptoe of expectation: will consumers spend more this Christmas, do our part to restore the economy? We, too, are abuzz, looking forward to visits with family and friends, parties, abundant food and drink. We’re busy, busy, busy, cleaning house, looking up recipes, sending cards and annual letters, buying gifts, making donations to charity.

And in the midst of it all, still doing our level best to have a quiet Advent. This can be confusing, indeed, as our own desires and intentions pull us in conflicting directions.

We’ve come for an oasis of peaceful reflection, a handful of us this morning. But what will/can draw us out into the wilderness with the crowds, to hear the fiery words of the Baptist and wade with him into the Jordan? What’s to keep us from covering our ears until we arrive safely at the stillness and peace of Bethlehem?

Our times and circumstances have more in common with those of Paul and the three prophets than we might have realized a decade ago. Their times and ours vibrate with uncertainty and threats to safety:

- Paul is in prison as he writes to the Philippians of rejoicing.
- John and the crowds are under the weight of Rome, and John, too, will soon be locked up.
- Zephaniah calls for songs of praise from a people exiled in Babylon.

- Isaiah sings of water from the springs of salvation to a people frightened by rumors of Assyria's rising power and ambitions.
- Taliban and other militants fight our troops abroad; some dream of attacking America; Iran and North Korea proceed with developing nuclear capability.
- The global environment is at risk from gases poured into the atmosphere and toxins into the waters.
- Economic uncertainty, grinding poverty and hunger loom as large for millions around the world, as they did in ancient times.

There is no greater entitlement or guarantee of security and favor by birth or baptism into tribe, clan, nation or faith today than in former times.

Perhaps it's not so much quiet and serenity we need, as, something real to hope for, to sing and shout aloud about. Something to fuel our rejoicing at all times, a focus for our own deepest passion.

We share not only dangers and uncertainties with these prophets and Paul, but also an expectation and desire for the One who is coming.

There seems to be no way to reach the peace and joy of Bethlehem, though, without passing "Go" with John in this wilderness, and "paying" whatever it is that he is on about. We may be able to cut back on holiday consumption, but not on this: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

"What then should we do?" we ask along with others in the crowd. And here I am puzzled. After wielding his ax (for cutting down at the root, not pruning, unfruitful trees), and stirring up the fire with talk of the coming wrath of God's judgment, John's answer seems rather tame: *Share. Don't cheat or extort. Don't bully.*

No call to sacrifice, to give up a livelihood as soldier or toll collector for Rome, or to join John in a life of asceticism in the wilderness. Just live a life of compassion and integrity, where you are. But then, what prophet worthy of the name does not call us to such a life? Who among us does not need frequent, even occasional harsh, reminders as we fall short? What a transformation there would be of human society and all creation if each one of us began living faithfully, consistently according to the prophets' exhortations.

Will I really be ready if only I can manage to work on my moral improvement, and loving my neighbor? Is that the good news John preaches, the cause for rejoicing for Zephaniah, Isaiah and Paul?

If I don't cheat, steal or bully; if I bring a can or box for the food bank every Sunday; drop my change in the Salvation Army bucket at the grocery store; make a

generous pledge to the church; do volunteer work somewhere; make my year-end charitable donations . . . is that really all?

Wait . . . I seem to hear a new voice: *Ready or not . . . here I come!* Already God has come, into the messy life of human society, into all our moral disarray.

Even under the threatening shadow of the Assyrians, Isaiah calls on the inhabitants of Zion: “ring out your joy, for the great one *in the midst of you* is the Holy One of Israel.”

Even in exile, with the line of David cut off, the true king of Israel, “the Lord, is *in your midst,*” sings Zephaniah.

Even in prison, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice,” writes Paul.

Even into this broken, indifferent world the One who is coming has come to be with us, as one of us, in the mystery and grace of the Incarnation.

He is the one more powerful than John. He gives his life that all may live, that all flesh may see the salvation of God: the lame and the outcast, pacifists and soldiers, tax collectors, sinners repentant and blind, rich and poor, weak and strong, enemies and friends—all flesh.

What he asks of us is not only that we share our goods with those who are hungry or cold, and live lives of integrity. He does ask that, but also something more, everything, in fact: that we follow him, giving up our claim on our life as our own, for his sake, that we may have life in him and the Father.

As John promised, this more powerful One has come to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire, the Spirit and fire of Pentecost. To set us on fire with love and passion for the God of justice and mercy he reveals. To fire us up with love in action for all God’s people and creation. To keep the flame of rejoicing and thanksgiving alive in us, giving light and hope in the darkness of the world and of our own lives. To encourage us to keep our lamps lit until he comes again. (*See, Luke 12:35-36*)

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.*