



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 12, 2021

READINGS FOR 3rd ADVENT, YEAR C INCLUDE:

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; FIRST SONG OF ISAIAH, PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 3:7-18

ADVENT RECIPES



One of our sage octogenarians told me that our Collect for this Third Sunday of Advent was, in past decades, a call to arms in the kitchen. Stir up your power, O Lord...was the prompt for your Christmas cooking to begin in earnest—stirring up your recipes for cookies to send to friends, your fruit cakes, and to finalize the menu for the Christmas feast and make your grocery list.

The Third Sunday of Advent is a pivot, and the recipe for this day includes the seemingly contrasting ingredients of joy and judgment. It's an

odd concoction at first glance, but there is a sublime beauty to it when savored more fully. By the light of the rose candle on our Advent wreath, meant to mark the turn in the season, we are invited into the fullness of expectation. The baby is not here yet, the feast is not yet set, but the preparations have begun. So let's stir things up, shall we?¹

¹ The image on the front page is entitled "Hope" (which is the essential ingredient for Advent recipes).

<https://fineartamerica.com/featured/hope-woman-portrait-svetlana-novikova.html>

The [scriptures](#) are a good place to start. When in doubt, go there!

Zephaniah, a prophet who normally leans to his cranky side, turns into full regale of God's merciful ways and invites us to rejoice and exult with all our heart. Isaiah, too, joins the theme and exhorts us to rejoice as we draw water from the springs of Salvation. The springs of Salvation, folks! What an image! Effervescent water, unending spring of grace flowing into our lives, however weary, to be healed. That's what salvation is about—the experience of healing, here and now! So ring out your joy, for God is in our midst. And then Paul joins the theme—practice rejoicing exponentially. Practice gentleness, with yourself and others. And know the peace of God that surpasses human understanding.

This cascade of joy elicited in these scriptures is not something we just read about; we let them prick our ears awake, we give voice to them in our lives, we proclaim this good news, so that we can know it in our bones to be true. God is up to something, here and now, and if we really believe that, we cannot help but rejoice.

And then comes the gospel...after the litany of joy, we get Luke's admonition, a rather dire passage of judgment, not joy. Persisting with the theme we have heard since Advent began. John the Baptizer, desert prophet, didn't mince words, calling us a brood of vipers. He shouldn't call names, but he wants to get our attention because this is important stuff.

If we think that baptism or being a child of Abraham are mitigators against judgment, think again. God wants your heart—why?—because God knows what's there, what's really there.

So John pushes us: Where are the fruits worthy of repentance, which is to say, will you see your life as God sees it, rather than being duped into seeing something else, or someone else. Who are you? Where are your good fruits to be shared?

Judgment is a key word in the gospels. It's a pivot point, a turn, like today is, a moment of truth that is ultimately not about punishment; it's about coming to a crisis point and deciding which way you intend to go. Or as Lauren Winner explains it: "To judge something is to see it as it is—and God's judgment is the act by which God sees us as we are. Is this good news? The answer depends on what you think you are, what you think God will see."²

You may have read this week the sobering report of the Surgeon General's rare decision to issue a public health advisory on the mental health crisis in our youth. The barrage of challenges experienced by their generation—peer pressure, gun violence, climate change, racial injustice, a fast-paced media culture, difficult relationships with family, and a complicated brain chemistry in adolescence make for a recipe of potential disaster. The pandemic is overlaid onto all that. In the first part of this year, emergency room visits in the U.S. for suicide attempts rose 51% for adolescent girls compared with the same period two years earlier. Globally, depression and anxiety doubled during the pandemic, and the demoralizing effects of them are at epidemic proportions. Loneliness is a key predictor of depression and anxiety.

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/december-13-third-sunday-advent-zephaniah-314-20-isaiah-122-6-philippians-44-7-luke-37-18> Some thematic content in the sermon draws inspiration from the essay.

The Surgeon General said this: “Young people are bombarded with messages through the media and popular culture that erode their sense of self-worth — telling them they are not good-looking enough, popular enough, smart enough or rich enough...”³

I belabor this because I hope we can all agree we are in a crisis. That’s the Greek word for judgment—*krisis*, crisis, and we are invited to see ourselves as God sees us. And God sees us as beloved, beautiful, worthy of hope, even as God invites us to hope for another way as well.

The Church has a critical role in all this. The Church, in my opinion, is being called to task: to bear fruits worthy of repentance, to see ourselves as God sees us. Our children and youth desperately need to hear this message, again and again, so that they can draw water from the springs of Salvation, and rejoice in life because they know it in their bones to be true—that what they see in the mirror is what God sees, and it is beautiful, and beloved.

They won’t believe that if their parents don’t believe it. They won’t believe it if we, as a community supporting them, do not believe it. The Church is called into this crisis, right here, right now, to share the message we have to share. Our children need to hear it now more than ever, especially given the isolation of the pandemic, but the truth is, we all need to hear it, and believe it. Practice gentleness, with yourselves and others, and see what happens.

Judgment and joy are odd companions at first glance, but what holds them together is hope. But let’s take care to consider what hope is. Walter Brueggemann, our old friend, says it this way:

“Hope...is not just a vague feeling that things will work out, for it is evident that things will not just work out. Rather, hope is the conviction...that God is tenacious and persistent...that God intends joy and peace...

“Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability...turned the enmity of society toward a new possibility, turned the sadness of the world toward joy, introduced a new regime where the dead are raised, the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again.”⁴

We are invited to come home. Jesus is known as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The deltas and omicrons, and all the other interim letters of our lives, are gathered up into the fulsome hope that God is in our midst, and Jesus persists in this healing story for your sake and mine. Advent holds that hope and expectation with us, so that we can rejoice that God sees us for who we truly are, and we can, too! And that, my friends, is very good news.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/science/pandemic-adolescents-depression-anxiety.html>

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. *A Gospel of Hope*. Westminster John Known Press: 2018. 104-105.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.]*

The First Song of Isaiah (Isaiah 12:2-6) *[Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior. Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. And on that day you shall say, Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name; Make his deeds known among the peoples; see that they remember that his Name is exalted. Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, and this is known in all the world. Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.]*

Philippians 4:4-9 *[Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.]*

Luke 3: 7-18 *[John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "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." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.]*
