

Advent: A Home For All (with Joy)

Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-18 Zephaniah 3:14-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 12, 2021

As with the past two Sundays, let me reiterate the overall theme for this year's season of Advent. It's called *Close To Home*, a resource from A Sanctified Art. Again, when something hits close to home, there's an emotional connection that affects us because it's something that we can closely relate to on a personal level.

Today's focus is entitled, A Home For All, with ties to the third candle in our Advent Wreath, the Candle of Joy. As one of the more progressive and inclusive mainline congregations here in Tulsa, it doesn't take a lot of effort to realize that making a home for all really hits close to home for us.

The Old Testament Reading from the prophet Zephaniah 3 helps set up this theme of home and joy he writes to those in Exile in Babylon about their return to Jerusalem:

The Lord, your God, is in your midst... God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in God's love and will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival...

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.

That message of home and joy is admittedly a bit harder to discern from Luke's telling of John the Baptist and his message, but it's there. Before we get to that, here's what biblical commentator Kathy Beach-Verhey has to say to preachers on this particular Sunday.

No one wants to be chastised by John the Baptist this close to Christmas. No preacher wants to read this text when preparing for his [or her] third Advent sermon. No parishioner wants to be challenged by John's words as she [or he] sits in the pew enveloped in thoughts of final Christmas preparations and purchases.

There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger without first hearing the rough prophet in the wilderness call us to repentance. Trying to avoid or sugarcoat John's words is just not possible. Faithful and fruitful arrival at the manger will be possible only after the careful self-examination and recommitment called for by John.

There's no doubt that John the Baptist was a hellfire-and-brimstone kind of prophet who pronounced a tough message to those who ventured out into the

wilderness to be baptized. That same message applies to us today. Strangely, however, the gospel writer Luke follows this message with, “So, with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news?!? Where’s the good news in a message like that? Maybe we need to take a closer look and try to find out.

There is part of John’s message that certainly needs some clarification, because it has most often been misinterpreted as one of harsh judgement and eternal punishment. A resource I often refer to is from a group called **SALT** at saltproject.org. It put’s what seems like John’s message of condemnation in context this way:

But doesn’t John himself speak of “separating the wheat from the chaff,” including some but excluding others? And doesn’t he say Jesus will come and make this fateful separation, burning the chaff away in “unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17)? That’s one way of interpreting John’s metaphor here, but a closer look points us in a different direction.

Every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) use wind to separate these husks — collectively known as “chaff” — from the grain, the goal being, of course, to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain. **This is a metaphor of cleansing and preservation, not division.** What the wind and fire remove are the “husks”: the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn has it right: there is a line between good and evil, but it doesn’t run between groups; it runs through the heart of each person. What each of us requires is restoration, liberation from whatever “husks” are holding us back. And sure enough, later in Luke and Acts, **this is exactly how the wind and fire of the Spirit work: not to destroy, but to sanctify, refine, challenge, restore, and empower.**

With that, here’s how our Advent resource summarizes John’s message.

“John the Baptist’s good news sounds harsh, but he preaches a home for all—where inequities are banished, valleys are lifted up, and all have the resources they need for collective flourishing. Ultimately, John’s message is one of joy. We are called to collectively build and repair the structures of our society; we are called to be kin-dom builders. Wherever we build, God is there. What we build should be a place with a large table and room for all.”

Resource commentator, Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, adds: “This was, and is, a message of joy, especially for those who had lost hope, hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious authorities aligned with it. The world as they knew it was about to change.” That also applies today to our American empire and religious authorities aligned to it. And with God’s help, hopefully things now are about to change, as well.

John the Baptist’s basic message was a call to repentance, and that our lives must bear fruit worthy of our repentance. Luke’s telling of this story has the crowds, tax collectors, and even soldiers all asking the same question, **“What then should we do?”** That should be *our* question, as well. The answer: **an uncompromising demand to live a life of fairness, generosity, unselfishness, and justice.** Share your abundance with the vulnerable, and do whatever job you have with honesty, integrity, and respect. Cintrón-Olivieri, states it this way:

- **Instead of accumulating, share with others what you have.**
- **Instead of being indifferent or selfish, show consideration and compassion.**
- **Instead of taking advantage and preying on the vulnerable, be satisfied with what you have and treat others fairly and with dignity.** . . . even if you work for the empire (v. 12-14).

John the Baptist tells the crowds, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (v. 11). To the tax collectors, John warns, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (v. 13). And to the Roman soldiers, he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages” (v. 14).

Notice that in John’s answers **repentance has less to do with how fervently we pray or how faithfully we attend worship, but instead, has everything to do with how we handle riches, execute public service, and exercise good stewardship.** His message of repentance concerns acts of social justice more than religious ceremony or even belief. Repentance, for John, isn’t about being really, really sorry for the bad things we have done, or for the good things we have left undone. Rather, **repentance involves the practical acts of actually turning away from any of our ways of greed, indulgence, egoism, hypocrisy, selfishness, and the like. This is how we are to prepare the way for the coming kin-dom of God,** a way of being embodied in the one coming after John the Baptist, namely Jesus of Nazareth.

Concerning John’s practical exhortation to “bear fruit,” biblical commentator Mariam Kamell summarizes it in this simple way, “God expects people to behave, not merely believe.” Our repentance, therefore, accomplishes nothing less than improving the personal, communal, social, and political conditions of this world here and now.

So, on this Third Sunday of Advent we are called to a deep level of self-reflection – as individuals and as the church – so that we will be led, joyfully, to repentance. Yes, **we are called to examine those ways of being and doing in ourselves that do not reflect the way of life that we believe God is calling us to lead.** This is a call to take stock of the ways we hide behind tradition, national or church identity, wealth, ethnicity, privilege, or position in life. **John’s practical answer to “What shall we do?” is this:**

- **We are to care for the needy – to share our wealth, whether food or clothing, with those less fortunate.**
- **We are to be fair and honest in all our dealings with others, especially in our professional work and relationships.**
- **We are to use our station in life not to lord it over others, but to live within our means and do what is just.**

We must, according to John the Baptist, live the faith we claim to profess. Authentic Christian living always comes with that challenge. While this challenge may not be the one you came to face on this particular Sunday in Advent, it is, nevertheless, what John the Baptist offers. I think this message of repentance is one that everyone in our country, Christian or not, needs to address, as well.

Again, as in the past two Sundays, I want to close this sermon with a poem written by resource poet and writer of the worship liturgy we are using each week in our worship bulletin. It’s by **Sarah (Are) Speed.** Broadening our own understanding of

providing a home for all, this poem, she writes, was "**Written with love for all who identify as transgender and/or non-binary.**" It's entitled, *Advocating for Home*.

Advocating for Home

By Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed - Sanctifiedart.org

I know you don't feel at home in your body.
 Your clothes don't feel right.
 Your bones don't feel right.
 Your name, just a word that people have labeled you with.
 I see the way you try on pronouns like I try on clothes,
 looking for something—anything—that feels right.

And what I would give to build you a shelter—
 a safe space where you could be,
 a home where you were safe and free.
 What I would give to carve out some room
 for you to process and grieve
 and dance and sing your way
 into your true self.
 But I know
 it's not that easy.

My hands cannot build you safety.
 My words cannot give you time.
 My heart cannot be home enough.
 So until the day when you are truly at home,
 I will keep marching for you.
 I will keep advocating for the home you deserve—
 the home in your own skin.
 I will keep praying.
 I will give you my second coat,
 and the shirt off my back, and the food from my table.
 I won't give up on preparing the way.

A voice is calling out in the wilderness.
 Do you hear it?

There's more for us here than has been before.

I'll close with this remark from the SALT resource: "Sing out your joy loud and proud, and you just might hear John the Baptizer and all the prophets of old singing with you!" May we all join in that song of joy and we prepare a home for all.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word

"Joy, Wind & Fire: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Three", saltproject.org