

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY**

**Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2024**

SCRIPTURES:

Zephaniah: 3:14-18	The Lord is still among the people.
Philippians: 4:4-7	Paul is filled with joy because the Lord is near.
Luke: 3:10-18	The Baptist urges people to live rightly for the Lord is near.
Response: Isaiah 12:2-6	“Sing praise! The Great One is among you!

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the three Scripture passages given in the Lectionary for this weekend. Begin with the Gospel, since the other readings are always chosen in terms of the Gospel reading. (The second reading does not always have the same theme as the Gospel and the first reading. The first reading will be directly related to the Gospel in its content.) Repeat the Gospel reading. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the faith community and does not necessarily answer any questions which an individual may have. We simply ask, “What message does the Church (or this faith-sharing group or this family) need to hear? We listen to the word with that question in mind.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Luke:

John the Baptist appears in Luke as a much more domesticated prophet than he does in Matthew. He has a well-developed plan for the coming of the Messiah. People are called, not just to some general notion of repentance and change of heart. John has a well laid out program of social justice and practical moral conduct for people to follow as they do what is needed for the Messiah’s coming. Everyone: Share with the poor. Government workers: Be honest; don’t extort money from the people. Military personnel: Do not use excessive force. Tell the truth. You are well paid, so you need not take from the people you are supposed to protect.

Our question, too, is addressed to John the Baptist: “What are we to do to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ?” John tells us: Do not wait until you are able to do spectacular things. Do something now. In the ordinariness of life, do the ordinary things with justice and love.

The “Good News” of John’s message is that God’s will is not some obscure, hard to fathom and impossible set of legal observances. The good news is simple conversion to God’s will: conformity of our behavior with what God wants. And God wants moral reform, pure and simple.

The community for whom Luke wrote needed to hear, and we need to hear, how best to prepare for the coming of the Messiah into our lives. The renewal that we all must undergo consists in turning our lives around so that we can be going in the direction that God wants for us. The Church of the 90s AD is the same Church of today! Two thousand years have not

changed the fundamental demands for conversion of hearts. The goal is still the same for us as it was for those early Gentile Christians.

“What should we do?” Live your life in obedience to the commandments, in conformity with the way Jesus lived and taught. That program is not secret. It has not been kept hidden from the eyes of those who want to see, from the ears of those who want to hear.

The “Holy Spirit and fire” will appear in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles again at Pentecost. That’s when we will be immersed in the transforming power of God for the building of the reign of God.

Zephaniah:

Six hundred years before Christ, even before the Exile in Babylon (587-537 BCE), before the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah, Zephaniah was a prophet of the Lord during the reign of King Josiah who attempted a religious reform in Jerusalem. Most of this book consists in threats hurled at the city of Jerusalem, signifying all of Judah, to the effect that unless they reform, they will be severely punished. No mention is made of the reforms undertaken under Josiah, leading some scholars to conclude that Zephaniah lived just before those reforms. Perhaps his prophecies may have inspired them. The section quoted here seems to be an addition to the book dating from after the Exile, perhaps as much as 100 years later than the rest of the book. “The Lord is in your midst.” The Lord has not abandoned you forever!

Philippians:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again: Rejoice!” Dismiss anxiety; the Lord is near to his people. The Christians at Philippi had every reason not to rejoice: some Jewish Christian troublemakers were harassing them because they were not circumcised and did not observe the Jewish dietary laws. They were being accused of making unwarranted concessions to the Gentile world. This reminds us of some archconservatives today who accuse us of having sold out to a godless culture! Moreover, the Romans were beginning to breathe down their necks for refusing to pray before idols. Humanly speaking, they had every reason for anxiety. But Paul says, “Rejoice! The Lord is among you!” If the Lord is still among us, what reason do we have to fear?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What evidence do you see in your parish, family, prayer group, Sunday assembly, that the works suggested by John the Baptist are being practiced? Do you observe in the Church community that people are serious about doing God’s will? Does it consist in doing concrete and everyday kinds of things? Or are you waiting for something grandiose and spectacular to happen in your life? Why should we not wait for those kinds of things?

2. Gift giving during the holiday season means, first of all, the giving of ourselves. What portion of yourself will you give when Christmas comes? What kind of gifts are you planning to give this year? Do you give things so that you will not have to give self? What part of your time should you spend with those whom you love? Do you find it hard to share from the very core of your heart? How could you learn to do that better?

3. Look at the places where you live, work, study, recreate, or spend leisure time. Can you think of something you might do now to witness to your Christian joy in that environment? Do you consider yourself too young or too old to give witness to Jesus Christ in everyday life? What would be the right age? If you witness only at church or in your ministry group, do you hear John the Baptist speaking directly to you?

PRAYER OF ST. FRANCIS

Lord, make me a channel of your peace; that where there is hatred, I may bring love; that where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness; that where there is discord, I may bring harmony; that where there is error, I may bring truth; that where there is doubt, I may bring faith; that where there is despair, I may bring hope; that where there are shadows, I may bring light; that where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted; to understand, than to be understood; to love, than to be loved. For it is by self-forgetting that one finds self. It is by forgiving that one is forgiven. It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life. Amen.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Catholics have more fun than Protestants, don't they? No, this is not a Reader's Digest kind of question. In fact, surveys have shown that Catholic ethnics in the United States have more family celebrations, participate in more social events, and attend more community dances than do Protestants. Is there something about Catholics and the art of celebration, perhaps? The liturgical tradition of the Catholic Church has something to do with this, I am sure. Years ago, before Catholics were ecumenical, I was invited by a United Church of Christ minister to speak to his high school church group about Catholic attitudes toward "mixed marriages." After the formal presentation, there were questions. A boy in the back row raised his hand and said, "Our minister said that Catholic priests celebrate weddings and Protestant ministers officiate. When we asked what a priest does to celebrate, he said, 'You whoop it up. Is that true?'" We do celebrate our sacraments. We all celebrate together. The priest presides. We celebrate together as a community. I do hope we have more fun!

We celebrate sacraments. We celebrate the Eucharist, especially. The rituals are not just recitations of ancient prayers. They are an outpouring from the heart of the Church. Our tradition has given us the accumulated joy of the ages. The joy bursts forth as we enter into the mysteries of faith. (By the way, mysteries in the Church are not something secret or hidden. They are just the opposite: something REVEALED, made known. The things divine are communicated to human beings.)

A Protestant minister was present and proclaimed one of the Scripture readings at a recent funeral in our parish. Later, he said that the "ritual was so sincere!" The Episcopal rector replied, "Of course, rituals are sincere!"

The official worship of the Catholic Church, as that of many other Christian communities, relies heavily on rites that express the faith and the prayer of the whole community and not just those of the one who presides at the worship. The Church is at prayer when we use rituals, not just this priest or this assembly. The whole Church is called into being and is

launched into prayer whenever any of its parts or portions enters into official prayer. The mode of prayer calls the whole Church forward into the prayer.

See: The Catechism #1067-68, 1141, 1188, 1104, 1097, 1088

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