

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Today we mark the third Sunday of Advent as part of the start of a new Christian year. Advent, derived from the Latin word "*adventus*," means "coming" or "arrival". In Greek, the word is "*parousia*", a reference to the second coming of Christ. In this season, we certainly prepare for the arrival Christmas day when we mark the birth of the Christ child. But we also use this time to prepare for the second coming of Jesus as judge at the end of time. Advent is intended to be a time of spiritual growth and this season in the Christian year has been celebrated in its current form for about 1600 years. The four Sundays of Advent are a time of reflection and anticipation with the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. In our readings appointed for Advent each year, there are recurring themes from Scripture. Typically, the first Sunday of Advent proclaims Christ's coming in final victory. The second and third Sundays focus on John the Baptist, and the 4th Sunday reflects the events immediately preceding the birth of Jesus.

Each season of the Christian year has its own mood, meaning and type of prayer. The liturgical colours that we use are all drawn from nature and are intended to symbolize and reinforce the meaning of each season. For Advent, blue became the traditional colour in the Anglican Church about 50 years ago, and it is most often associated with the Virgin Mary. But it has also been designated as the colour of preparation in the Anglican tradition. As Advent falls at the darkest time of the year in the Northern hemisphere, the powerful symbols of darkness and light have special significance and this has become part of our tradition through the lighting of the Advent wreath – a custom that the Anglican church adopted from Germany in the 1800's after Queen Victoria married Prince Albert. Although the Advent wreath had been part of German tradition for about 300 years before coming to England, I think it is interesting that Queen Victoria chose to adopt it along with the German tradition of the Christmas tree in order to help Prince Albert feel more at home in England.

On this third Sunday of Advent, we mark the theme of joy. In our Old Testament passage from Zephaniah, we have words that are also known as "The Song of Joy". In our

reading from Philippians, Paul makes the connection between the ultimate peace of God and feelings of joy. And finally, in our Gospel message from Luke, we hear how John the Baptist has the attention of every level of society as he speaks of a time when a future leader will place society under judgement.

As I noted last week, I always find it a bit jarring to have John the Baptist burst onto the scene during Advent. We hear him described in the Gospels as a pretty wild looking character with a decidedly questionable fashion sense who eats locusts and honey. But we also hear that he is a powerful speaker and that he has the ability to capture and hold people's attentions. It is an unusual kind of charisma that he wields, but he makes the most of it. And this morning's Gospel reading is no exception. The gathered crowd has followed John to a wilderness area east of Jerusalem. They are, in effect, out of their comfort zone already by being in a physically challenging environment. He is speaking about a new future, a different kind of future that will place different demands on these people than the Jewish faith of that time demanded of them. His message is a timely one, and this is part of the reason why people are following him out of the city into this wilderness terrain. Jerusalem and the entire region around it is under Roman occupation. There are a lot of social injustices that are commonly accepted and there are many prejudices against those with infirmities. There are also great inequities in terms of wealth and power, with a few people holding the majority of wealth and power while many people suffer. By leading this crowd into the wilderness, they are being separated from the wealth and the power that is held within Jerusalem. We can also imagine that there are many prophets and merchants in the public places of the temple, calling to people for their attention. But John is clever enough to know that his message cannot get lost among all the competing voices at the temple, so he draws the crowd out to a place of quiet.

When John stops to speak, he surveys the crowd and sees that every level of society is represented within this group. There are the poor, those with infirmities, some with wealth, and some with power. He notices that, among the figures of the gathered crowd, there are also Pharisees and Sadducees. This is when we realize that God has created

this very important opportunity to share his message. People are listening and there is a very definite curiosity about what he is going to say.

At this time, the Jewish leadership was very much focused on people following the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. Jewish law was, and to a degree still is, a very complex system of rules about almost every aspect of life. For many during John's time, Judaism has become less about a spiritual experience than it was about following a series of rules without necessarily understanding the nature or intent of those rules. And so John is challenging their thinking – the thinking of the average person, but also the thinking of the leadership. In a society where the Pharisees and Sadducees were held in very high esteem and were rarely, if ever, questioned, this was a shocking moment when he refers to them as a “brood of vipers”. Perhaps John feels that he can get away with this strong language because he knows that they are something of an insecure group. The very fact that they have followed him outside of the city and down to the river is a bit of an indication of this. John invites the people down to the river to act out their commitment to change within themselves and, therefore, in their society. In giving themselves to the act of baptism, they symbolically die to what they have been and are born to what they will be. From John they hear that the future will demand they become a new kind of individual and a new kind of society. John insists that this demand is going to be made by an actual person. In his own mind, of course, he is thinking of Jesus, who has not yet begun his own public ministry. Just as we wait in anticipation to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, John is anticipating Jesus taking on a powerful ministry of his own that will change the world.

There is a kind of symmetry between this long-ago gathering in the banks of the Jordan River and our society of today. To a degree, we all face our own wilderness experiences and we know that, as a world, we are facing great change. Like the people gathered in the Jordan Valley to hear John speak, we are facing deep challenges; as individuals and as a broader society. We don't have to focus on thinking in terms of a “wrath to come”, in the way that John speaks. We need, instead, to concentrate on the last sentence of this morning's Gospel reading: *So with many other exhortations he proclaimed*

the good news to the people. John is encouraging us to renew or even recapture our spiritual lives this morning. He wants us to remember that if we can stay focused on the spiritual, we will be alright. He is reminding us of good things to come and to seek out the hope, the peace, and the joy of this beautiful season of Advent and to take comfort in the love of God. Amen.