

### **Third Sunday of Advent – December 16**

This Sunday in the old pericope system was called “gaudate” for the first word of the Introit: Rejoice! Thus, in some places the purple of the candles is softened to a pink. It is as if the severity of Advent relaxes for a Sunday, which provides an interesting segue into a discussion about Advent, its roots and its current practice.

When the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent were developed, the people of God were in very penitential moods for various reasons. This is more true of the Lententide, but also true of this Advent-tide as well. A millennium and more ago Christianity was a quite ascetic religion. The heroes of the Christian communities were not the well-dressed Rick Warren types or the Joel Osteen’s in their massive television empires. In truth, the men who occupied the bishoprics and other positions of power within the church were often corrupt in the medieval world. The real heroes of the Christian communities were the ascetics, the hermits, the monks living in the desert, fasting most of the time and wrestling with Satan as they prayed.

This ethos translated into the urban centers of the Christian movement and people demanded penitential seasons. Advent was not imposed on people, but it was granted to them. Lent was not a forced fast before the Easter joy, it was an attempt to curb and contain the excessive fasting and penitential acts of the people.

The Sundays fit into that dynamic in a way completely different than we are used to. Remember that church was a daily occurrence in this time. The services for Monday through Saturday were extremely penitential. The preachers were thundering judgment and law, and the people wanted to hear that. They took this whole penitential thing very seriously. Sunday was the day when the Gospel was to be proclaimed, it was to be the relaxation of the penitential rigor. That is why the Sundays of Lent, for instance, are never counted within that season, but are Sundays IN Lent not OF Lent.

Of course, in our experience of this, we are in exactly the opposite situation. Our people are hardly begging for penitential disciplines. In fact, the only penitential disciplines they probably experience are on Sunday mornings; although, one might point to diet regimes and debt reduction as another form of penitence. The result of this societal change is that the day which was supposed to be the relaxation of the penitence has become the occasion of the penitence. The week which was understood to be the penitential rigor which needed relaxation has become conspicuous in its consumption and its singular lack of penitential rigor.

So, this Sunday presents a bit of a quandary. The readings are designed to provide relief to a penitential rigor that simply doesn’t exist anymore. The preacher could take on the difficult task of building up a penitential mood just so he can relax it. But if your people walk in the door already celebrating Christmas, do we really want to preach them to gloom, so we can alleviate that gloom with a proclamation of joy? I don’t think so.

I think we will have to get much more creative with this. Is it time to do some pre-emptive joy spreading? Our folks certainly will have times of penitence and teeth gnashing in the very near

future. After all, what is a New Year's resolution but a form of penitential vow? What grief and wailing doesn't accompany the opening of the credit card bills after the gift buying orgy which is the very definition of Christmas for many of us. How will we send out people into these moments with joy?

The last thing I think we want to do is to say that their joy is ill-founded. Do we really want to say that their joy is somehow not the right kind of joy? Granted, they may be fully engaged in the consumer society and others are taking this as a time to give to the less fortunate, that may be the very source of their joy as well. It does give joy to help another. But the young person who is glad for the prospect of getting the latest video console under the tree is not necessarily the enemy of Jesus.

What is more, the man who claims to derive his joy from philanthropy may also be problematic. Are we sure that they have joy? Is it really just a mask they are assuming because the season demands it of them, but underneath is a lurking unease about finances, about family, about their community. Perhaps the preacher's task is to let them let down that mask in the presence of God and express their genuine fears and angst. In that situation, is the command to "rejoice" exactly the opposite of where we want to start? Does our worship need to give room to express grief, fear, worry, sorrow today? Is it simply the wrong message?

A creative sermon idea: Perhaps this Sunday needs to start with a special attention paid to the confession. There is a rite of corporate confession and absolution in the hymnal which allows for a sermon. Perhaps we want to use that instead. Do we want to stop right there and deliver our law element of the message, walk through the congregation and collect the things that are making us afraid, the things that we worry about, the dark and dismal things we feel which the world tells us we should not feel. The world says that those feelings are somehow a weakness, something wrong with us. The world sends us to a psychiatrist and prescribes a pill or some therapy to banish those bad feelings. But the church gives us a place where we can be sad, so that we can hear a message of real joy. The church lets us express our fear so we can be comforted by Christ and the love which God has shown us in Jesus. The world does not have room for us to have those negative feelings in this time. The world has no solution to these feelings, so they banish the feelings instead of proclaiming a hope and a joy even for people with tears in their eyes. In this way the bible and the church have a much more sophisticated and complex anthropology and psychology than much of the world has.

Jesus will also go through times of terrible angst, and it appears Paul and Luther did too. Those are real feelings; they have a place in our life. If we will preach joy today, how will we make room for the sorrow which also has to find a place in our experience? Churches are not places where people often feel comfortable expressing those feelings. But should the church not be the place where the whole person gets to speak? Is this the "Law" for the church today? Have we told folks to be happy so we don't have to listen to their real problems?

## Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*The prayer is addressed to Jesus, somewhat unusual in the collects we pray.*

*We implore him to hear our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by his gracious visitation/presence. What is that darkness of our hearts? Do our people think of their hearts as dark places or places of light? What can we point to which is darkness and which they can agree is darkness?*

- 1. Darkness of Relationship – many families dread this time of year, the stresses of the holidays often bring out the worst in us.*
- 2. Darkness of Isolation or Loneliness – We are lonely for Jesus, and we can sometimes just be plain lonely.*
- 3. Darkness of Health – Many people die around the holidays, quite often they will push through to the big day and the week after the holiday will see a precipitous decline. Nursing home employees call January the “death month.”*
- 4. Darkness of confusion and meaninglessness – Why am I here? What am I supposed to be or do? What purpose does all this have and what is my role in it? The busy-ness of life can mask a deep set of questions to which we really don’t have answers of ourselves.*
- 5. Darkness of Finances – The recovery is jobless and many who have not been able to find work are losing hope. Our local paper recently had a series which focused on the folks over 55 who just are not finding work. If we have a job or a secure retirement, that is certainly not true for some people whom we love. This can become a gnawing worry which is an acid on our joy.*
- 6. Darkness of Sins – We know we should not do it, but we do it anyway. Whether it is an addiction or just a really bad habit. There is much of my life that I would simply rather forget.*
- 7. Darkness of Regret – “I wish I had taken that job” or “I wish had not married this person.” Sometimes the brightness of an imagined other course action can cast our whole heart into a dark shadow. The reality is that we would have regretted the other decision too.*
- 8. Darkness of being out of control. County workers gunned down while attending a holiday party stabs right at the heart of our sense of security and comfort.*
- 9. Darkness of Hopelessness – it doesn’t look like there is any savior on the horizon. The Donald, Putin, Obama, or anyone else. Who will rescue us from the things we are afraid*

*of and which are overwhelming the world right now? I am sure the refugees are thinking this right now. Who will save us?*

*10. Darkness of our fear – December 21 is just around the corner. Three years ago we were wondering if the Mayan calendar wasn't predicting the end of the world. Seems silly now, but fear in retrospect often does. It rarely does in the moment.*

*All this darkness might lead us to a crisis of our faith. How does Jesus' visitation enlighten that darkness? He is the light of the world. When he shows up the darkness must flee before him. He offers forgiveness and restoration for relationships, the healing of body and soul, if not right now, in the hereafter, he gives meaning and direction to our lives and assures us that he has eyes on the plight of the poor. He holds out his perforated hands which speak of his forgiveness and the depth of his blessing despite our decisions and past.*

*The preacher might want to remember that darkness is not really a thing. It is an absence of light, not a real thing of itself. It doesn't resist the light as much as it simply is eliminated or banished by the light. Light is something, darkness is not.*

*Of course this is Advent – we proclaim the hopeful expectation of this Jesus. On Christmas we get to say that the light has dawned. (Assuming the Mayan calendar was not just off by three years and the world really is not going to end on Dec. 21!)*

## **Readings**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

<sup>8</sup> *"Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD,  
"for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.  
For my decision is to gather nations,  
to assemble kingdoms,  
to pour out upon them my indignation,  
all my burning anger;  
for in the fire of my jealousy  
all the earth shall be consumed.*

<sup>9</sup> *"For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples  
to a pure speech,  
that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD  
and serve him with one accord.*

<sup>10</sup> *From beyond the rivers of Cush  
my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones,  
shall bring my offering.*

<sup>11</sup> *"On that day you shall not be put to shame  
because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;  
for then I will remove from your midst*

*your proudly exultant ones,  
and you shall no longer be haughty  
in my holy mountain.  
12 But I will leave in your midst  
a people humble and lowly.  
They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD,  
13 those who are left in Israel;  
they shall do no injustice  
and speak no lies,  
nor shall there be found in their mouth  
a deceitful tongue.  
For they shall graze and lie down,  
and none shall make them afraid.”*

*14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter of Jerusalem!  
15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;  
he has cleared away your enemies.  
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall never again fear evil.  
16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
“Fear not, O Zion;  
let not your hands grow weak.  
17 The LORD your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.  
18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,  
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.  
19 Behold, at that time I will deal  
with all your oppressors.  
And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.  
20 At that time I will bring you in,  
at the time when I gather you together;  
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.

*Zephaniah’s little and seldom read book addresses a pretty dismal situation in Israel’s history. The political fortunes are down the toilet for these guys at this point, but also their spiritual health seems pretty bleak. The archaeologists who dig around in that part of the world are astounded at the sheer number of idols they find in the houses from the pre-exilic Judah.*

*I have included the verses immediately prior to this in order to give you a better sense of what it is that Zephaniah is talking about. He speaks of humbling the haughty people of God who have desecrated God’s mountain. Zephaniah appears to have been an early contemporary of Jeremiah. Israel, the northern 10 tribes, are gone. The south has been reduced to the city of Jerusalem and its immediate environs. The mighty nation of King David is nothing but a little rump state, rather like the fact that all that remains of the once massive Holy Roman Empire today is the tiny nation of Lichtenstein.*

*Shortly before Zephaniah’s ministry began, Jewish kings Ammon and Manasseh had introduced idolatry to the very center of the Jewish faith, even into the temple itself. As a result God handed them over to their enemies. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, and other invaders have pretty well marched at will through the whole of Palestine. The once glorious kingdom of David is irrelevant politically. The house of David has somehow managed to hold onto the throne. If the tradition is accurate, Zephaniah is a member of that royal house, a grandson of Hezekiah the king.*

*He is hopeful of the reforms of Josiah, but realizes that this is a serious cancer which is eating at the heart of his people. As a member of the political class, he also is aware of what is going on outside the walls of Jerusalem. He sees the growing power of the northern kingdoms of Babylon and the other Fertile Crescent powers and realizes that the days of Israel’s independence are numbered. He preaches a message of repentance and impending doom for all the peoples of the region, including the Philistines and the Ammonites and the Moabites.*

*His dire warnings are proved true when Nebuchadnezzar and his armies thunder into the region and subjugate everyone.*

*But for today’s reading we don’t have the warnings and the messages of gloom and judgment. We have the final chapter of Zephaniah’s book, in which he proclaims hope. This is one of the really strange things about Jewish/Christian scriptures. Most religions preach that if you are on the god’s good side, you can experience blessing, good things. But oddly, the scriptures of Christianity admit that those who are the people of God often suffer terrible things. But even when they are being stomped upon by their enemies, God has not abandoned them nor has he given them over to destruction. He might be disciplining them, but he does not hate them. They always remain his precious people.*

*Critical to this whole passage is verse 15 in which God takes away the judgment and their guilt. Zephaniah sees a day when the whole of world will gather around God's Zion. The people of God are not the end of the story, they are the catalyst for the final and great goal of history, the salvation of the whole world.*

*These words are given to give hope to a discouraged people, to a people who are about to go through a time of tremendous testing and difficulty. The prophet proclaims a hope prior to the testing so that they can, in the midst of the testing look back upon these words and take comfort from them. God has never left their midst, he will remove their shame, he will gather the ones who mourn and grieve for the festival. (Do you have folks in your parish who can do little more than grumble about the way that Christmas is celebrated? It is as if the current situation robs them of their joy.) God will turn their mourning into joy.*

*The preacher may also want to focus on verse 17 with its powerful imagery of what God does for his people. Zephaniah proclaims the God in their midst, strong to save. He will quiet them with his love and rejoice over them with loud singing. This is God singing in joy over the people of God. Zephaniah does not see the people of God slinking into heaven by some back entrance, but with royal and angelic fanfare, with loud singing and God's great rejoicing that you are there. This is a hard message for Lutherans to hear who have pretty well had drilled into their heads that they are worthless and only heaven by God's grace. But such piety can become a form of pride when we tell God to stop rejoicing over us because really we are just too humble to endure such a thing, as if our sins were bigger than his salvation!*

*Too often we have the idea that we are supposed to make "Christmas" happen. We are supposed to get this right so we can all have a good Christmas, as if that rested on our shoulders. But verse seventeen might be a great sermon for this week. We proclaim a day of rejoicing – but this not another thing we need to do. We proclaim the day of God's rejoicing, God's great joy over us!*

*Does Zephaniah speak to a community today which is tempted to react to the situation in San Bernardino with anger, violence, and bigotry? Christ has called us to love the enemy, not hate them. Does Zephaniah's appeal to rejoice in the face of the shameful reproach of Jerusalem tell us to love even the ones who hate us? Joy would come, will friendship one day come as well? The Donald this week is proclaiming hatred of our enemies, proposing that we mistreat them and single out Muslims. But Jesus calls on us to love our enemies. He makes no allowance for our safety. Indeed, Jesus says that we will be persecuted.*

## Psalm 85

LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup>You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin.

Selah

- <sup>3</sup> You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.
- <sup>4</sup> Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!
- <sup>5</sup> Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
- <sup>6</sup> Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?
- <sup>7</sup> Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;  
but let them not turn back to folly.
- <sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.
- <sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- <sup>11</sup> Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
- <sup>12</sup> Yes, the LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- <sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him  
and make his footsteps a way.

*The psalm might have been prayed by the person who heard Zephaniah's prophecy and turned to God. Will you be angry with us forever? He/she had heard a word of hope but was not feeling the good will of God at this point.*

*The preacher might be attracted to the final section and beautiful phrase in verse 10. Righteousness and peace kiss one another. Righteousness should occasion war and conflict with all that is unrighteous, including me. God's holiness, His right-ness, can hardly tolerate my sinfulness. John Chrysostom found this enigmatic phrase too good to pass up as have others. The only way that righteousness and peace can kiss is through the cross of Christ. Faithfulness does indeed spring up from the ground and righteousness looks down from the sky at the one who hangs, suspended between heaven and earth.*

*The Lord is the giver of good things, says verse 12. Our land does yield an increase of the faith which springs up from it. Righteousness goes before him. The Holy Spirit is holy not only because he is holy in and of himself but because he causes things to become holy. He makes things holy. He is the Sanctifier. Jesus death and resurrection has poured out that spirit on us. Is this, in Jesus' words of the Gospel, what make the least in this kingdom greater than the greatest*

*of the OT prophets, John the Baptist? Is it this universal gift of Spirit, no longer limited to the prophet, but now filling all the world? Has this made the way (Jesus) for us?*

*There is so much here that the preacher could play with. Careful consideration and prayerful association of this text with others will potentially yield wonderful results.*

*Philippians 4:4-7*

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*

*<sup>2</sup> I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

*<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*

*Four sermons in this text:*

- 1. Rejoice always – Paul just got done talking about a conflict in a congregation. Even then we can rejoice in Christ.*
- 2. Let your reasonableness be known to all – Paul never let things get to him. He was always able to talk it out with someone. He was always able to be problem solver with someone, even someone who hated him. He was a reasonable sort of person, but that was not because Paul was that way natively – Saul of Tarsus was not reasonable. Paul the Apostle was (consider Sosthenes in I Cor. 1 and Acts 18)*
- 3. The Lord is at hand – a theology of prayer. Our supplication is embedded in prayer and thanksgiving. God not a vending machine, but we are in a relationship with him. Jesus is right here.*
- 4. The peace of God that surpasses understanding. It is Lutefisk season. You could start by talking about the piece of cod that surpasses understanding and work from there. ☺*
- 5. Bonus: Extend the text – a sermon on excellence – the presence of Christ means we think and do the things that are excellent.*

*This is the traditional text for the day, from Paul's great letter of joy to the people of Philippi.*

*Are we too busy celebrating Christmas to rejoice? Is Paul just laying an impossible burden on us? We have the oxymoronic command to rejoice. This is a little like commanding someone to love. If I am rejoicing out of obedience to the command, is it really joy? But God's word creates that which it demands. Light sprang into being when God demanded that it shine in the creation. Likewise God's word here creates the joy.*

*Our faith is not a matter of unreasonable or mindless religious fervor. We have a reasonableness which is evident to all or at least is knowable by all. I think that the reasonableness of Paul has to do less with his rational appearance and more to do with the fact that he always had an ability to talk to anyone, even someone who had tried to kill him (Sosthenes!) He was always reasonable, never reactionary or an ideologue. That reasonable justification for our joy is the immanence of the Lord. He is at hand. That belief changes everything about me. I solve problems, answer questions, meet challenges, love my spouse, care for my children, all them differently because Jesus is there. He is the reason not just for the season, but for my whole joyful life. I am not beaten down by my situation because I know that Jesus is here and there is nothing that can change that truth. Remember, Paul is writing these words from prison. And it was not always for the folks in Philippi. I have included the verses right before this in which Paul seems to helping two squabbling women in the parish patch things up. Conflict is a fast track to an unhappy congregation.*

*Paul exhorts them not to be anxious about anything, and the key to that is prayer, to take everything to God with supplication and thanksgiving. It is that thanksgiving piece which is the real focus of Paul's words. God is not a divine vending machine dispensing the requested salvation, but we find ourselves in a dynamic relationship with him in which we are resting in his hands, and we recognize that the whole of our life is related to him. That means that we claim no good thing but receive them all from him with thanksgiving. The person who is well along on this sort of a spiritual growth trajectory will find him or herself thanking God even for things which the world finds difficult. Paul rejoices in his imprisonment because it has given him a chance to witness to the imperial guards. Corrie Tenboom in Ravensbruck thanked God for fleas and lice because it kept the guards at a distance and allowed them to read their secret copy of the Scriptures.*

*This peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keeps us. This is the traditional conclusion to sermons, at least in my youth and I retain the practice to this day. There is a real tension inside the text at this point. Our reasonableness is evident to all, but the peace which transforms us and which keeps us in Christ transcends human understanding.*

*We can be reasonable about this, but we have to admit we don't fully understand all this ourselves. Living in a mystery is not an unreasonable thing to do. I don't always know how Christ is present in my life, how his peace is able to do what it does, but I can bear reasonable witness to the reality of what it does to me. I don't exactly have to understand the dynamic of how Christ's presence makes my struggle with cancer or financial ruin or some other tragedy a*

*serene and even joyful experience. But I can tell you that Christ has made even this reality different because he is part of it.*

Luke 7:18-28 (29-35)

<sup>18</sup> The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, <sup>19</sup> calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” <sup>20</sup> And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” <sup>21</sup> In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. <sup>22</sup> And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>23</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

<sup>24</sup> When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>25</sup> What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. <sup>26</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup> This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

<sup>28</sup> I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” <sup>29</sup> (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, <sup>30</sup> but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

<sup>31</sup> “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? <sup>32</sup> They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’

<sup>33</sup> For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ <sup>34</sup> The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ <sup>35</sup> Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

*Does this sound familiar? The concluding verses were read as Matthew told them in chapter 11 a few weeks ago from the Gospel reading on Reformation Day.*

*There are a couple of interesting questions in here. John sends his disciples with a question. Why does he do that? Isn't he a prophet? Doesn't he know the answer to this question? Does he truly doubt the identity of Jesus as the Messiah?*

*The answers one gives are important perhaps mostly for understanding self. Do prophets know everything? Can they have doubts about even their own proclamations? One view of God and prophets would suggest that this is impossible. But an adult experience of God might suggest that it is not always the case that he is clear and complete. Do even the prophets have their doubts? That could be a very interesting insight for folks who are struggling to figure out what God's love means for their lives?*

*Perhaps John sends them with the question because he is the prophet and because he already knows the answer and the disciples need to see it. This would be a more pedagogical motive for the questioning. John is putting the question in their mouths because they need to hear the answer from Jesus. This preserves for us a picture of prophets as these preternaturally knowledgeable characters. But does that need really say more about our own need to see the prophets in a certain way?*

*Another way to understand this is to see it in light of Luke as an author and his needs. Is Luke dealing with the persistent John movement which shows up in a couple of other places? When Paul meets Apollos, for instance, in Acts 18, he is identified as only knowing the baptism of John. Is Luke in fact recording John's doubts because he wants us to see Jesus as greater than John? Does he record Jesus' statements here about John to give clarity to a reader who might have been confused about the presence of a Jesus and a John movement in the first century?*

*Jesus answers the questions with a quote from Isaiah, but interestingly he does not use the similar string of messianic deeds which included "freedom for the prisoners" (See Isaiah 42 and others). Was John actually asking Jesus to set him free? Was he bewildered by the fact that Jesus' coming did not mean that the Romans were kicked out and the messianic age was ushered in with power? His preaching would have lent some credence to such an expectation. Is Jesus teaching the prophet something here? Or is he teaching the prophet's disciples a lesson the prophet also wants to teach? Or is this Luke teaching us?*

*We won't be able to solve this conundrum, but the preacher may find that any of the solutions give him some preaching traction. He just has to be careful in the way that he proclaims this that he does not exclude or 'transgress' the other ways to understand this.*

*Jesus answer, of course provides a rich opportunity for a sermon on the Messianic mission. The blind do see, the lame walk, the dead are raised. Jesus ministry is a powerful testimony to the scope and the power and the purpose of his mission. He does not come just to deal with my naughtiness, but with every problem I may have, all the darkness which I find in my heart, to bring us back to the language of the collect for the day.*

*But in the second part of the Gospel, after the emissaries from John have left, he addressed the crowd and gave the Jesus "take" on John. John is a prophet, a great prophet. No reed blowing*

*in the wind, no softie who compromised with the system, he was a real man of integrity. Jesus then tells us that John is the one of whom Malachi wrote. He was the greatest of those born to women, but he is less than the least in the kingdom of God.*

*This final enigmatic saying is worthy of stopping for a moment to consider what it says. Does Jesus mean that John is less than angels? It could be, I suppose. In one sense, we have always thought so, but this is hardly news. The question, it seems to me is whom does Jesus mean when speaks of those who are in the kingdom of heaven? Are they the baptized Christians? Is Luke telling us that John is inferior to the little child who bears the name of Christ? Is Luke a crass successionist? That is an often discredited movement among some Christians which implies that Christianity replaced Judaism, succeeded it, and that the Old Covenants of the Jewish people have been utterly replaced. This of course runs afoul of some of Paul's treatment of those covenants in Romans. Is Luke suggesting that the lowliest Christian is greater than the greatest prophet of the Jewish tradition? That is quite a claim.*

*It all depends on what you think Jesus means by "those in the kingdom..."*

*When the people hear this, the religious leaders reject it, but the sinners whom John had baptized assent and consider it to be true. Again, this seems to be addressing a first century John movement which is still hanging around at the time of Luke.*

*What then to make of this final section of the pericope? Jesus wonders what to do with this generation. John they did not like because he was outside the mainstream, Jesus they also critique for being inside the culture. There is no pleasing these people. Wisdom will show her fruit, her children will bear witness to her and they will justify her. I am not quite sure what to make of that.*

## **Law**

1. My heart is darkened. My religion is too often a cold and lifeless thing. I go through motions, sometimes don't even do that very well. I should do better, but I don't. Like John I am beset by doubts. Like the folks at Zephaniah's time, I have let the world come into my relationship with God and work its poison there. I can gripe about anything. I am good at that.
2. The result is that the joyful exhortation of Paul to the Philippians can sound like an admonition to an alien people. This bright and cheerful season is dark to me. The commercialization of Christmas has made a sour taste in my mouth.
3. But my inability to celebrate in this time is not really their fault, it is my problem. My heartless religion is often because I feel like God is far away from me, distant from my problems. John sits in his prison cell and wonders if Jesus is really the right one. The people of God in the Old Testament have much to grieve about. I don't see any miracles, nor do I feel any divine presence.

4. But maybe this is not about divine neglect. What if God's real absence from my life is by his intent? What if I have worn out his patience and forbearance? I know my Sunday School teacher said it was impossible, but those lessons were a long time ago and so many other things have proven to be untrustworthy from my youth. What if the assurance of God's constant love is another childish wish which simply doesn't pan out when I am a grown up?
5. Is the exhortation to "rejoice" today, just a cruel thing to say?

### **Gospel**

1. Jesus sends the disciples of John back to him with a message of hope. The daughter of Jerusalem will shout for joy. God knows the enemies I face, even the interior demons and idols which tempt me. This does not hang on my getting this right but on his work. Thus, even the lousy hymns at church at which I cringe are not really my problem, but rest in his capable hands.
2. God's Word creates the very joy which it demands. This is not an act of my will or of my decision, but a result of his abiding presence in my life.
3. Today God comes to me and you. He is in our midst. He has strengthened our hands and quieted us with his love. Saints of God have faced their enemies with courage and aplomb. They have sung on their way to face lions and the cruel swords of gladiators. That courage-giving Jesus comes to us today in the same faithful relationship which has mediated his presence since the apostles stood staring up into the blue Galilean sky.
4. But the presence of God today is still not the end of the story. He makes a solemn and holy promise to us. He will exult over us with a song, he will remove all our shame, he will bring us before his throne with a mighty host from every tribe and nation. God has not turned from us in grief or disgust, but he has turned his face toward us in Jesus, cleansed us from our sins and delights in what Christ has made in us.
5. God asks for no joy which he has not already planted in our hearts.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. Rejoice! Righteousness and Peace have kissed (Psalm and Gospel – that the hearer would rejoice because God has solved the great dilemma of our sin.)

Advent was once a time of fasting and repentance, but today it is a time of eager preparation and expectation. We could lament that, or we can see the good of what God does in this too. This sermon will opt for that second approach.

Jesus says today that the least in the kingdom is greater than an OT prophet. It is always better to look back on the great deeds of God than it is to look forward to them. I concur. We have a better place to be because we can look at the birth of Jesus through the lens of

history instead of only through the lens of promise and expectation. It is good to be here rather than in decrepit Jerusalem waiting for the Babylonian hammer to fall and counting on the deliverance of God. We have much to fear and many things which can suck the joy out of our lives, but we can look back upon the reality of Jesus, his birth, his death, his resurrection and with 80 generations of Christians rejoice in what God has done.

The heart and energy of that joy is found in the beautiful verse 10 of our psalm today. In this Jesus righteousness, the righteousness of God, has set down its hostility toward sinners like us. God wrath is averted. The doom which we deserved has been taken off the table. Righteousness kisses peace (Shalom). This Shalom was much more than simply an absence of conflict, however, it was the whole package, health, success, well-being in every facet of our life – the mind, body, relationship, and everything else. God's righteousness which should have been our enemy has now become our friend.

The preacher may want to read Luther's preface to his collected works from 1545. Therein he says that once he hated the very idea of the righteousness of God. It was his enemy but then it became his friend. The difference was when he fell into the gracious hands of God. He calls it the tower experience, the insight which stands at the heart of the reformation itself. God's righteousness, the goodness of God, has been given to us human beings in Christ who takes up humanity to himself for that very purpose. The Christmas we are about to celebrate is God coming to us to render us right. The result is peace – the peace that Paul says transcends our understanding.

It was a vision to look forward to for Zephaniah's people, and indeed it is still somewhat for us today. The slaughter of 14 people in San Bernardino is only one of many things in our world which should trouble us. We must also look forward to the final expression of God's shalom in our lives. But right now we can also rejoice for we look back on the center of God's heart for us – the Christ who lived, died, and rose again for our sake.

2. Rejoice in the Lord – after all, He rejoices in you! (OT and Epistle: That the hearer would believe that God has cleansed him/her of all sin, and now he/she is really clean, purified by the blood of Christ today. This is an occasion for joy as we anticipate the day of Christ when he will reveal what we really are.)

Do consider the suggestion I make in the opening essay that you might split the sermon and start at the confession with a gathering of the things that cause us fear, anxiety, darkness. What gets in the way of our Christmas joy? What makes this season hard? Are we buried under the commercialism of it all? Do we dread seeing our families? Do we miss someone terribly this Christmas? What makes it hard to rejoice? The second part of the sermon then becomes an answer/word of comfort to some of those things.

We thought that a small congregation might give the members a stone upon entering. Have them hold that stone in hand while they consider the things that rob them of their joy. Gather those stones into a basket and place it at the altar and proclaim that this is

why Jesus was born. He came to deal with these things. The preacher might want to play with the life of Paul here. There was a day when Saul of Tarsus was a stone, a fearsome thing for the people of God. But Jesus repurposed him. The sermon could end on some beautiful hope that way. We don't want to say that the fears and anxieties and sins of our people are not real, but we also can say that the very things of which we are afraid are not bigger than God's ability to turn mourning and fear into joy and praise.

This sermon addresses the fourth Law/Gospel point above and builds on verse 17 of the Old Testament lesson, the Epistle lesson and the words of Jesus in the Gospel lesson which he says that the least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than John, the greatest of the prophets. We can be happy because God is happy. A wise man I knew once said that we become like the God we worship. If we worship a grumpy God, then we will get more and more grumpy, but if we worship a joyful God, then we will grow in joy. One of the reasons I believe a lot of folks struggle with joy is because they don't see/believe that God is happy. All they can see is God's anger over sin. But Zephaniah and Paul proclaim that God has dealt with that and God now rejoices over us! And when God laughs the whole world can have mirth.

This Sunday is traditionally called "gaudate" or joy Sunday, and the readings today all contain a word about joy. Paul makes it into a command, which is an odd thing to do when you think about it. It is sort of a catch 22. If I am happy because someone told me to be happy, am I really happy? Commanding a thing like joy or love or thankfulness is almost an oxymoron, but God does it? How can I have joy when I know people I love are suffering? How can I talk to my grieving friend and have joy and not be cruel in that joy?

How can God ask/demand that? First we must remember that this is the same God who called light and the whole universe into being with a Word. When he commands, the very thing he commands springs into being. But there is more, today he commands and demands joy because he has joy. Have you ever thought of God as being happy or joyful? Often we have a picture of God as stern or the suffering Christ on the cross. We perhaps envision him seated on the throne of heaven, but do we ever see him laughing? Does God know how to smile?

Listen carefully to the readings today. God rejoices, God delights, God exults with a song and shouts to the world. God has an exuberant streak. He does not take himself seriously, at least not as we imagine that self-seriousness, so that he cannot have a good time.

But even more interesting is the occasion for God's good time. He delights over us. He delights over what Christ has made, he rejoices over you and me. You see, what makes God really happy is not sternly rendering judgment on the sinners of the world. One rather gets the impression that is his duty and he will do his duty. No, what gives God great joy is to forgive sinners, to remake his spoiled creation in the blood and the image of his Son, to wash the stain away. That really makes God joyful. And he has done this, so he is happy!

God is happy, you see, he delights and exults over you. Today in this time together, Jesus is here because he wants to be with you. Do you see now how Paul can exhort us to joy? How he can tell us to pray and bring all things to God with supplication and thanksgiving? You really are greater than the prophets of old, for you are on this side of that cross and today God holds you in his mighty hand and he looks at you more intently than any jeweler inspecting a great diamond. He sees not your sinfulness but the thing that Christ has made, the beautiful, eternal, lovely thing that Christ has made. And he likes what he sees.

The smith refines gold and silver. Too much heat and the metal will become brittle and useless. How can he tell? He must watch it all the time, control the flame and the heat. How can he tell when it is purified? Goldsmiths tell us that when the smith can see his reflection in the metal he knows that it is perfect.

So rejoice today. God has lifted his face upon you, smiled upon you and given you peace. This builds intentionally on the benediction at the end of the service, the preacher might want to develop that.

3. The God in our Midst (OT/Epistle That the Lord would open the eyes of the hearer to see His presence today so that he/she might eagerly, joyfully anticipate the revelation of that same Lord Jesus on the last day.)

This sermon addresses the first, second, and third Law/Gospel couplets and really focuses on the perception that many of us have that God is distant from our lives. We are not in the days of the disciples when miracles were happening, when the multitudes were fed and the lame walked. God seems to be absent from our lives. The sermon will point the hearer to the presence of God right now, but also speak the Advent promise that this often unsatisfying presence of God is in fact but a precursor of a glorious day of Christ's revelation.

There is a funny thing about Christians, which more than one oppressor has noticed. They are irrepressibly cheerful. I heard a story about a man who was being tortured by the Viet Cong in Hanoi during the Vietnam conflict, a downed airman from whom they were trying to extract a confession. They were slowly forcing his shoulders out of joint and he did not think that he could take it anymore. By his account he in that moment uttered a simple prayer "Help me, Jesus!" At that point he says a wave of peace came over him, the pain went away. He knew his body was being contorted and harmed, but it stopped hurting. He said he looked up at his torturer and laughed. It was so disconcerting that the man released him, left the room and the torture stopped.

The presence of Christ can be somewhat uncomfortable. One loses control of life when Jesus is standing right there. He is the king after all. But we have the privilege of giving all to him. The peace of God flows out of that relationship, but Jesus gets to be king and I am not. That is perhaps the law development in a sense. We have banished God to some

deist distance because our sinful self wants to call the shots. We want to be in control, or at least we think we do. The preacher might want to point out that we have not been very good at controlling things. They seem to be getting out of hand again.

Today, as God has gathered us to his house, from lives which can at times seem very dark and dreary. This one is struggling with her family, that one has a crisis at work. Another fights an addiction and another grieves the death of a friend. John from the darkness of his prison cell sounds like us today. We send to Jesus and ask, “Are you really the one?” It was a fair question. John had preached that the coming of the Messiah would bring all sorts of change, and it did, but he stayed in the cell. In fact, John stayed there until the day the soldiers came and brought him to an executioner and he died because a young girl could dance and an old woman had a grudge.

We ask John’s question – are you the one? If you are the one, why is my life still so dark? Why does Paul’s command to rejoice ring so hollow for so many of us?

We start with Jesus’ answer. He says look around you. The deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. Jesus also exhorts us to look around us and see the presence of Christ who makes a difference in this world. The hungry are fed today, many more than the multitudes who fed on the five loaves and two fish by the Sea of Galilee. The deaf hear and the blind see. How many of us are not wearing a hearing aid today, glasses, contacts or are enjoying the benefits of vision surgery? Those things came about because Christ gave hope and liberty to people to think and care and love. The universities and hospitals where those life changing devices were developed are all rooted in the Christian tradition.

But more, Christ is here today. He cares about you very personally and has come to this place. In this meal, in this font, in the fellowship we share and the words we speak among ourselves today, Jesus is at work. Who among us doubts that if one of us stood up and cried for help that this assembly would not step forward to help them? The lonely are visited, the sick are prayed for, the grieving widows find a consoling hand to hold and shoulder to cry upon here as we love each other. That is not just a bunch of nice people doing that, that is Jesus doing that, empowering those words and deeds to be more than you might think, because he cares.

I know this is not entirely satisfying. There are moments when you and I both want God to show up in all his power and glory and take the bad guys and put them under a big flat rock and stomp on the thing, squashing them like the vermin they are. But God’s ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. The POW I told you about earlier would wait many months before he was released, he still struggles with the effects of his imprisonment today.

But there comes a day when the Jesus who has given the blind to see, the deaf to hear, who comforts widows and forgives weeping sinners will reveal himself to wipe every

tear away, to rejoice of us, to brag about us to angels and the nations. Then our joy will be complete and his will too. God will restore our fortunes before our very eyes. Rejoice, the one who comes is the one who is here right now.