

The Third Sunday of Advent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Zephaniah 3:14-18
<i>Response</i>	Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.
<i>Psalm</i>	Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 4:4-7
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 3:10-18

The Third Sunday of Advent for Year C is known as Gaudete Sunday, which is from the Latin word meaning rejoice. It's the first word of the introit for the mass that's actually taken from one of the letters of St. Paul, his letter to the Philippians, when Paul says:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.¹

So this third Sunday of Advent is kind of like a midpoint in a penitential season where we've been preparing for the last couple of weeks for the coming of the Lord, and we're halfway there, and now we are going to celebrate today. We're celebrating the joyful dimension of the Advent season and you'll see that in the readings for today in a special way. So with that theme in mind let's turn to the gospel for today, it's from the Gospel of Luke 3:10-18. In this case the church has given us another one of these texts from Luke that is distinctive to Luke, it's something that's only found in the Gospel of Luke. Scholars call this special Lucan material or special Lucan passages — they'll sometimes just call them L passages, af-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

ter Luke, meaning these are texts that are only found in this gospel. In this case the special passage from Luke is about the ministry of John the Baptist and it's a window that we are given into John's ethical teaching, or his moral teaching. So we know about, so to speak, his sacramental activity of, you know, calling people to repent so that they might be baptized with the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but it's easy to miss, because the other gospels don't tell us about it, that John also had a moral dimension to his preaching. He called people to change their lives in very specific ways and so today the church gives us one of those exchanges. This is from Luke 3:10-18, it's a semi-long passage but it's still a very important passage. This is what it says:

And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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 preached good news to the people.

A few elements of this passage that I want to highlight here. The first one is just the unique material in John, these exchanges between John and the multitude about how to prepare themselves. So what we have here is a series of three groups that ask John questions about how they should be living. So it's one thing to turn away from your sin and be baptized, it's another thing to change the way you live. So three groups speak to him: the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers and he answers them each in distinctive ways. So let's see.

First, the crowd says well how shall we live? And here notice what he points to, he points to almsgiving in the form of clothing and in the form of food. So he says if

you have two coats give one of them to someone who has none, and likewise with food, if you've got more food than you need give it to those who don't. So effectively what he's saying here is the same teaching we'll see with Jesus elsewhere in the gospels, which would be to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, right, very important point. Jesus wasn't the first person to teach those kind of corporal works of mercy, this is a continuity, a point of continuity between the teaching of John the Baptist and then the teaching of Jesus and his disciples. So to the crowds at large he says the first thing you need to be doing is engaging in the corporal works of mercy. That's a later...I mean that's not his language, that's our language, but that's the Catholic traditional way of referring to feeding those who are hungry and clothing those who are lacking clothing, who are lacking adequate clothing. Alright, so that's the first group.

Then the tax collectors come up to him. Now if you know about tax collectors in the ancient world, you'll recall that basically they were the underlings of the Roman government. Most of them were Jews like Matthew who would work for the Roman occupiers and who would collect taxes from the people and then give them to the occupying government. It was a position that was widely despised by the Jewish people because Jewish tax collectors were seen as turncoats, as traders, but also because there was the possibility for extortion and for abuse as there is to this day when people have the power to collect taxes. It's a very powerful office and it could be abused and misused. So the tax collectors, who are Jewish tax collectors, they come to John and say, well what about us, what should we be doing? John answers them by saying do not engage in extortion. In other words, collect no more than is appointed to you. Enact justice in your political office of being tax collectors and don't take more money than you need to take from the people.

Interestingly, finally, the soldiers come up and ask him the same thing, well what about us? And here he gives them three interesting directives. First, he enjoins them not to engage in theft, so don't rob anyone by violence. If you know anything about ancient and modern warfare for that matter, in the cultural and social instability that always follows war, in the wake of war, what will often happen is soldiers will engage in abusive activities. The occupying soldiers have power, they can steal from people, they can take their homes, they can take their money, they can take their possessions, right. So John is saying don't do that, don't engage in

theft, rob no one by violence. Another thing that can happen in the breakdown of warfare and wartime is that the normal processes of a justice system, where you have witnesses in a court and elders listening, which is what they had in the ancient world, that falls apart or can fall apart. So people can be falsely accused and then put to death without due process, without trial. So John says to them don't do that either, right. Don't make false accusations against anyone. And then finally, notice the last part there, be content with your wages. Now here John's exhorting them not to be covetous, right, to want more than is their due, but he's also reflecting the fact that in antiquity lots of people who were soldiers were mercenaries for hire. So in an American context, you know, there are lots of military families who serve their country out of the virtue of patriotism. Their grandfather was in the military, the father's in the military, the son's in the military, because they love their country and they want to serve their country. It wasn't necessarily that way in antiquity, soldiers often worked for hire and one of the dangers that was always part of ancient warfare was that if your soldiers didn't feel like they were getting paid enough they could basically revolt and end up killing the general, or killing the leaders, or turning against the very country that had hired them to engage in warfare. So soldiering was a very volatile type of occupation and so what John is saying to the soldiers here is be content with the wages that you receive, right, don't be covetous.

Now if you look at those, that list there: extortion, theft, false witness, covetousness, what do we see? We see some of the commandments listed in the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, right, against bearing false witness, against covetousness, against murder also, right, but also against theft and robbing someone, so violence and that kind of stuff. So what John the Baptist is saying to the people is, in order to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, first of all, keep the commandments in whatever state of life you find yourself in, but then also go above and beyond the commandments through the works of mercy, through the works of alms giving: feeding the poor, clothing the naked. Beautiful, beautiful exhortations from John the Baptist there. Now in the wake of that, as people begin to listen to John, notice what they think: maybe this guy is the Christ, in Greek the *Christos*, the anointed one. In other words, they think that John might be the Messiah. So we have the theme, this Advent theme, of the coming of the Messiah, an expectation of the Messiah is coming in the minds and hearts of the Jewish people, of devout Jews in the First Century A.D.

So notice, how does John respond to that rumor that's running about that maybe he is the Christ. Well he says, "I baptize you with water; but the one coming after me who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie," in other words, I'm not even worthy to be his slave, because this is something a slave would do. When a master would come home he would sit down, the slave would untie his sandals after a long and dusty journey and wash his feet, and what John's saying is I'm not even worthy to be the slave of the one who's coming after me, right. "He is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Then he describes this coming figure as someone who is going to be a judge, but he uses the harvest imagery here of a winnowing fork which was used to thresh out the grain and separate the wheat and the chaff in ancient Israel. When they would harvest the wheat they had to separate the chaff, the hull in which the grain was found, and they'd use a winnowing fork. They'd throw the grain up into the air and the wind would blow away the chaff and the grain would fall down, it would be heavier. So what he's saying here is that the one who is coming, the Messiah, is going to be a judge like that. He's going to separate the wheat, the grains of wheat that grows bread, from the chaff, which is just useless husks of the seeds. He's going to take the wheat and he's going to put it in his granary, but the chaff he's going to burn with unquenchable fire. Okay, so notice John there is very clear about the fact that the Messiah who's coming isn't just going to bring the good news of salvation, he's also going to bring judgment. He's going to separate humanity, he's going to cause division within humanity. So there is good news of salvation, but there's also a warning that we need to be ready, that they needed to be ready morally for the coming of Christ, and also to for us that we need to be ready morally to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Messiah that we're going to celebrate in the Feast of Christmas, in the Feast of the Nativity.

With all that in mind, let's go back to the Old Testament. The Old Testament reading today, as we've seen throughout the season of Advent, is a prophecy of the time of the Messiah. It's a prophecy of the age of salvation and this one is from the short little book, beautiful little book, the prophet Zephaniah. This is what it says here, Zephaniah 3:14-18:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the

judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; let not 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."

A beautiful prophecy there of the age of salvation. Why does the church choose that prophecy for this day? Well there are three reasons. First, the imagery of the daughter of Zion is a personification of the city of Jerusalem. So we've seen in previous readings from Advent that the people of Israel are frequently described as a woman, as a bride, as a mother, and that woman is frequently called either daughter Jerusalem or daughter Zion. It's a personification of the collective group of people as an individual, a bride who's waiting for her husband to come, a royal bride who's waiting for the king to come. So the prophecy here captures the note of expectancy that Jerusalem is waiting for the king to come to her. Second, it's tied to the forgiveness of her sins, right. So it says, "the Lord is taken away the judgments against you." So one of the things I talked about in previous videos is how the exile was seen as a result of sin, right. If you go back to the prophet Ezekiel before the Jews are brought into exile, the Spirit of God departs from the Temple, he leaves the Temple, and then the Babylonians come in and destroy it.

So the return of God to Zion, the coming of the king to Zion, is linked with the time of salvation, right. In this case, Zephaniah says to Jerusalem your sins are going to be forgiven. Therefore, number three, the king is going to come to you, the King of Israel will be in your midst, in your presence. So both the Old Testament reading, focusing on the coming of the King of Israel, and the New Testament reading from Luke, where John speaks about the coming of the one, right, the one who is to come, both those prophecies are about Advent, because advent in Latin is just the word for coming, right. It's the coming of Christ, the *adventus*, the coming of the Messiah. So both the Old and the New Testament reading kind of converge together on this Third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, and are calling us to rejoice because the king is coming into our midst on the Feast of the Nativity, the Feast of Christmas.

With that theme in mind, you can easily understand the Responsorial Psalm for today. I say that but I misspoke, but it's okay because today in place of the Responsorial Psalm is one of the few occasions where we have a passage from the Book of Isaiah and not a Psalm. So it's actually instructive. Virtually every single day of the year the church reads from the Book of Psalms with the Responsorial Psalm. But every now and then she will substitute for the Psalm a canticle, that's what it's usually called. In other words, a poetic song, s-o-n-g, a poetic song from one of the books of the prophets. In this case, the canticle is from the Book of Isaiah 12, it's the canticle of the joy of Jerusalem and of the joy of Zion at the coming of the Lord to the city of God. So if you turn to the Book of Isaiah 12, I'll just read verse five and six:

"Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

So Gaudete Sunday; what is the church doing putting the song of Isaiah, the song of joy, where he calls the people of Jerusalem to rejoice that God has returned to the city? Now we put that on our lips so that we can prepare to rejoice for the coming of God into the world in the Incarnation.

Alright, with all that in mind then there is a passage from St. Ambrose. He lived in the Fourth Century. He was St. Augustine's mentor and he has a wonderful commentary on the Book of Luke, on the Gospel of Luke. It's actually the oldest commentary on Luke that we possess. There were a series of homilies given by Origen of Alexandria in the Third Century on Luke but the earliest complete commentary is by St. Ambrose of Milan, he was a doctor of the church. It's really hard to get a copy of this in translation, but of course I have one, and so I want to read to you from St. Ambrose's commentary on John the Baptist's words. He says this:

The Baptist gave a fitting response to each kind of people. To the tax collectors he said that they should not exact payment beyond what was

appointed. To the soldiers, that they should not make false accusations or rob anyone, by which he meant that their pay was fixed, so that wanting to have more, they could not resort to plunder. These and other precepts are appropriate for all occupations, and the practice of compassion is shared. Thus it is a common precept that the basic necessities of life must be provided for all occupations, all ages, and all people. Neither the tax collector nor the soldier is exempted, neither the farmer nor the townsman, neither the rich man nor the pauper—all are commanded in common to give to the one who does not have. Compassion is the fullness of the virtues and therefore the form of the perfect virtue is placed before all.²

And that's St. Ambrose's *On the Gospel of Luke*, book 2, paragraph 77. Now why do I bring that passage up? I think it's important because of two reasons. First, notice what Ambrose is saying. No matter who you are, no matter what state in life you have, and no matter what occupation you engage in, you are called to justice, you're called to virtue, and you're called to compassion. It's easy to imagine a situation where someone who might be a follower of Christ might try to make excuses for themselves. You know, I can't help but engage in extortion, I'm part of this corrupt system of tax collectors; or I'm a soldier and so, you know, plunder is just part of what we do, this is just part of the habit of warfare. No, no. Ambrose is really clear here that every Christian, whatever state they're in, none of us are exempted from obeying the commandments and from practicing charity and almsgiving. I think it's really important to put that before us now, because during the season of Advent it can be easy to think about preparing for Christmas by setting up the Christmas lights, or going to Christmas parties, or, you know, going to mass or whatnot, but we don't want to stop just at that, we also have to prepare ourselves morally and ethically.

One of the great Western Christian traditions that goes back to ancient times is the practice of almsgiving during the season of Advent and during the season of Christmas, finding those who are poor, who are less fortunate than you, and engaging in corporal works of mercy and in acts of charity during the Advent

² Ambrose, *On the Gospel of Luke*, 2.77; trans. in A. Just, p. 63

season is a great way to do penance, not through fasting but through almsgiving. Giving away what we have, whether it be food or clothing to the homeless, to the orphans, to widows, to the elderly, to shut ins, whatever way, shape, or form you might be able to engage in that charity, to do that especially during the Advent season. Also, if you're in a business situation or you're in an occupation in which you might be surrounded by people who engage in immoral activity, to take a look at that and ask yourself, can I engage in this occupation justly, right, in keeping the commandments? Very important. There is no separation for John the Baptist or St. Ambrose or Catholics today between our Christian life and our business life. Our business life has to be governed by the same ethical ideals and by the same moral principles that our religious life and our life of worship should be, and the Advent season is a great time to remember that, because John the Baptist is basically saying to the people, if you don't do that you're going to end up, instead of ending up in the granary of the Messiah, you're going to end up in the chaff and burning like an unquenchable fire.

So there's always an edge to the good news, right. It's good news for those who repent, turn away, and begin to live the life of charity that Christ calls us to. So in this Advent season I just would call to your attention and to mine, all of us, to remember that the corporal works of mercy, especially feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the elderly, and giving to the poor, these are not optionals, these are essentials for preparing our hearts for the coming Messiah. When you do that, when you engage in these corporal works of mercy, when you engage in giving to those who are less fortunate, I promise you, you will taste the joy of Gaudete Sunday, right. Some people might say, oh it's Advent, we're getting ready for Christmas but I don't feel any joy, I just feel stress, I'm just anxious. Well I ask you, have you given anything to the poor? Have you taken time to serve others? Because if you're that anxious and you're that stressed in the Advent season, the likelihood is you haven't been paying enough attention to engaging in these works of mercy. I can speak of my own personal experience, whenever we do step out and begin to serve those who are poor, the less fortunate than us, you're going to actually feel and experience the joy of giving, the joy of receiving the grace of God to be a light to others during this time when we prepare for the light of the world coming into our world at Christmas.