

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Third Sunday of Advent – December 13, 2015

“Repent and Rejoice!”

Scripture: Luke 3:7-18 and Philippians 4:4-7; 3 Advent C

“You brood of vipers!”

I just have always wanted to start a sermon like that...

I agree with John that we need to repent, but with all due respect, I'm really not sure that I am with John entirely this morning. Look, John is an agitator. I know that. His job is to bother us, and he does it well. Oscar Wilde once said that:

*“Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent among them.” “That,” says Mr. Wilde, “is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary.”**

I get it. I really do. We need John. We need his voice. We are too often asleep at the wheel. We do those things we ought not do, and we don't do those things we ought to do.

* From Synthesis for the Third Sunday of Advent 2009.

But I've seen enough of the unquenchable fire lately to believe I need more of it from Jesus. I am so tired of the evil we human beings perpetrate upon one another that I surely don't need my savior to blast me with more of the heat. But I am neither turning aside John's warning, nor am I saying that everything about us is all right. We must repent, absolutely, or we are indeed lost. But this is the repentance that arises from Scripture this morning in a single word and burrows its way into my heart... Rejoice! Rejoice!

The world would not have it be so. Just pick up the paper. Watch the news. Surf the web. You'll find enough suffering there to make you cringe. The fear-mongering and the sensationalism are extraordinary. The call to despair is real. Repent! Rejoice! Turn from anxiety and fear. Do not give them a home in your hearts. Turn from the insecurity and fear that drives us to consumption and vanity, greed and violence. Stop worrying so much, and start looking out for the world in basic and good ways.

I do love this scripture about John the Baptist. You know he strikes a fearsome figure. You know he stinks of sweat and animal hides, his diet is made up largely of giant grasshoppers, he wanders the fringes of the cities accosting those who seek him out in the wild places. He holds back no insult, no matter the one to whom he speaks. We probably wouldn't like him if he came here. But for all his bluster, for

all his threats of condemnation, when the people asked him what they must do, his answer was about as simple and humble and practical as could be. It's like the volcanic eruption of his tirade ceases for a moment, so when people are listening, he says: Just be fair. Just be decent. If you have two coats, share with somebody who has none. If you're a tax collector, be fair and don't steal from anybody. If you're a soldier, don't resort to your strength of arms to take things that don't belong to you. Make do with what you have. And there it is: Repent! Share, even when the world tells you not to. Be honest, even when others are not. Be gentle. Be satisfied. Repent... and rejoice.

Please understand I am not being trite. To rejoice in the face of what ails us in our times is no simple act. I don't mean to rejoice as if there is nothing the matter. I mean to confront the fact that much is the matter, and seek to rejoice anyway, to not give in to the fear and the hate around us. The Lord has not failed to provide blessings in this world. Clear the clutter of our sinful concerns and see those blessings present in our lives and in the life of the world, and share that message with others. Persevere in hope and in love. See to it that people have what they need. Keep the faith.

It is Advent. It's the Sunday of the pink candle. We lighten the color in this third week of Advent to remind us to lighten our burdens of darkness and fear. We

hear the words from Philippians calling us to... *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* What a way to repent!

How near is the Lord, we might ask?

...There once was a man who wanted to know. So he went out to a hilltop and pleaded with God. "Speak to me!" But he only heard a bird sing. And disappointed he again begged God to talk with him and all he heard was the sound of children playing in the distance. "Please God, touch me!" he cried, but only the wind blew across his cheek. And discouraged at not having his plea answered the man prayed, "God, show yourself to me!" Yet nothing happened, except that a beautiful sunset gleamed on the distant horizon. And when he got home, his family came out to greet him... but he was sure that God was nowhere near.

Don't let's go there. Repent of what burdens us. Share the good news of love and forgiveness. Reach out to that friend or family member who needs it as much as you do. Reach out even to the stranger. Pray for those who are hurting in this world, and who hurt it. There's a world out there in a heap of darkness, and a Creator to whom this world matters deeply, and, like John the Baptist, we are messengers of the

Creator. So, John did his part. He told the story in his day. Now it's our day, our turn.