

“Switch”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
III Advent – 15 & 16 December 2018
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Well, John just spoiled the mood. We started out with hopeful words from the prophet Zephaniah. “You shall fear disaster no more.” “At that time I will bring you home.” Next we sung some verses from the prophet Isaiah, “Sing the praises of the Lord.” “I will trust in him and not be afraid.” And only moments ago, Paul offered encouragement to the Philippians, urging them to rejoice, to be gentle and not worry, to pray with thanksgiving, because the peace of God beyond understanding resides with us. But then John shows up with dire warnings, mean and nasty.

You’d think he’d be happy. Crowds of people heard his call and came to be baptized. Their very presence is a kind of confession. Why would they have shown up, unless they accepted their need for repentance? But for John, apparently, that wasn’t enough. He lashed out. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” A question to which more than a few probably said, “Uh, you did.”

John blazed on. “Don’t presume that your pedigree helps at all. Being a child of Abraham means nothing. The edge of the ax blade is right at the root, ready to chop down those who bear no fruit worthy of repentance. The wheat will be saved, but the chaff, the outer covering – the façade of faith, if you will – will be tossed into a fire that burns forever.” How cheerful.

Maybe John wanted to drive away those who were more curious than serious. After all, it’s better to make no commitment, then to make a superficial one, especially when so much is at stake. Maybe John felt the need to jolt people with harshness so that they could grasp the depth

and the danger of their sin. Whatever the case, they stayed, despite the insults and threats, and asked John what exactly he wanted them to do.

To quickly review, if you have more than enough, like two coats, give from your excess to someone who lacks what they need. To the tax collectors, don't lie about what people owe so that you can skim off the top. To the soldiers, stop padding your pockets by extorting people. The sum of the three: don't be selfish or greedy; don't manipulate people with your power to take advantage of their weakness; be honest and merciful, not deceptive and cruel.

That seems straightforward, but not so much. It was normal for soldiers and tax collectors to prey on people. It probably didn't occur to them that what they were doing was wrong, and giving up these common practices involved sacrifice. From what we know, neither profession paid very well. In their minds, pushing people around for an extra buck was the only way to make life a little more secure and comfortable. John was demanding major change, and that's nothing new.

For instance, the prophet Zephaniah, long before he gave cause for hope, served as an oracle of God's fury. Here's a small sample. "Gather together, gather, O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the Lord." [2:1-2] Or consider Isaiah, who before he got all happy about the future, conveyed this message from God. "Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint." [1:5]

Both prophets, in fact all Old Testament prophets, delivered the same message. The injustice and idolatry must stop. God comes first. Anything we prioritize higher than God is an idol, and when that happens, we spiral out of control. To put something ahead of God is basically the same as saying, "I don't trust God. I trust this other thing more." That's the heart

of all sin. And once we stop trusting God, welcome to a world of fear and insecurity, where might makes right and only the fittest deserve to survive; a world of injustice where anything goes – lie, cheat, steal, intimidate, you name it.

This was the world of the tax collector and the soldier and the person clutching two coats when one would do. This was the world of ancient Israel, to whom the prophets first spoke. The consequence for Israel was conquest and exile. The consequences for the people to whom John spoke were much the same: conquest by sin and death; permanent exile from the God of peace and life.

This is our world, where the slogan “In God we trust,” is printed on our money, but the number on the corner is what really matters. And the consequence is the misery we see and don’t see, the misery we can’t imagine and would rather not think about. The consequence is violence and hatred and corruption. The consequence is a deep hole in our souls that we desperately try to fill, in vain, because only God can give us the fullness of joy we desire.

But here’s the good news. God will. God will give us peace and joy. No matter what we do, no matter how bad it gets, God stands ready – eager – to give us what we need most. It’s simply a matter of surrender, of letting go of the things we’ve put ahead of God, and putting our whole trust in Him. And we don’t even have to do that much alone, because God’s grace works on us constantly.

Go ahead and try to run away from God. You might win that race, but God will chase you until your dying day. God won’t quit. That how much He loves you. God throws people and situations into our path so that we might trip up and wake up and think, “Hey, life doesn’t have to be this way. Our world doesn’t have to be as it is.”

That's why the prophets blast out gloom and doom one minute, and then make a radical – seemingly inconsistent – turn to “You shall fear disaster no more.” “At that time I will bring you home.” “Sing the praises of the Lord.” “I will trust in him and not be afraid.” Rejoice, don't worry, and receive God's gentle peace. They make that whiplash turn, because repentance works. Forgiveness works. Reconciliation works.

Even John, Mr. Grump-a-Lot, offers hope. “One who is more powerful than I is coming . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” There's a little menace in that, the idea of being set on fire, but isn't there a desire deep down inside to be on fire for something that really matters, to be set alight by the one person who matters most? Isn't there a yearning to serve as a source of warmth and light in a dark and cold world? Don't we all want to be inspired by the Holy?

It's all right there, just waiting for us to put God first so that He can bring us home and transform us into the people we're meant to be: humble and at peace; relying on God, who is always trustworthy and true; free from sin; unselfish, honest, gentle, kind; ready to serve as witnesses of joy to a world mired in despair. What greater gift could we ask for? What greater privilege could we receive? Amen.