

Third Sunday of Advent
Philippians 4:4-7, The First song of Isaiah, Luke 3:7-18
December 13, 2015
David Teschner

This Third Sunday of Advent is sometime called “Gaudete Sunday.” I thought it meant joy, but I had to Google Gaudete to discover what language it was. Turns out it is Latin for “rejoice.” For those of you who have a pink candle in your Advent wreath, this is the Sunday to light it.

If you happened to glance at the first reading on your scripture insert, you would have noticed the prophet Zephaniah writes, “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!”

We just read as a portion of The First Song of Isaiah, “Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.”

And in St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we heard, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.”

There is a heavy emphasis on the word “rejoice” on this Gaudete Sunday for sure. We need some joy after the events in Paris, Colorado, Chicago and California.

St. Paul contends that we can always rejoice and experience a deep inner peace regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. He is writing this letter, after all, while he is imprisoned.

Park Lemmond liked to distinguish concern from anxiety and fear. Concern is more productive than anxiety and certainly fear, but the peace of God that surpasses all understanding is the best.

That peace, which leads to rejoicing, Paul tells us, is not generated by human effort. We can’t make ourselves peaceful and joyful in the midst of trouble by simply willing it. Paul instructs us to pray with our requests and offer thanksgivings to God. In other words, we are to do what we can, accept that we can’t fully control the situation and then put it and leave it in God’s hands.

Paul, of course, makes it sound easier than it actually is because we are brought up, for the most part to be problem solvers.

If I have learned one thing by now, it is that there are few, if any, easy answers to complex family, community, national and global problems. Maybe if we could all spend more time in prayer together, we’d spend less wasted time blaming each other for our problems.

Peace and joy may to some be considered naive or irresponsible in light of the serious challenges we face from many fronts. I wonder, however, what beneficial decisions could flow when all parties started from a position of peace, joy and good will because, first and foremost, we trust God and seek God's higher wisdom.

Certainly, as we prepare to greet our Lord and savior once again, sent to us in human form at Christmas, we want to be moving more and more in the direction of peace and joy.

Joy and peace sound good, but they require of us the spiritual disciplines of prayer, gratitude, trust and, as John the Baptist tells us, generosity and integrity as well.

Last week Luke told us when John appeared and where John came from. Today we hear what he has to say. "You brood of vipers" doesn't prepare the listener for a message of joy and peace on this Gaudete or Rejoice Sunday. It could be a major turn off and disperse a crowd pretty quickly. Why would John be so contrary and condemnatory to the very people coming to him for baptism?

I think John wants his listeners to be there for the right reasons. John isn't there to make them feel good about themselves because they are God's chosen people and are being unfairly oppressed by the foreign, Gentile, Roman oppressors, even though that was true. John is not on the banks of the Jordan to help them blame someone else for their problems.

The Hebrew prophets of old surprised the Jewish people again and again when they proclaimed that the judgment of God would be upon Israel first and then upon the offending foreign nations. John does the very same thing when he says in essence, "Let's get this straight from the git-go: The problem is with you. You're snakes. If you want to be God's people, your hearts and minds and actions need to be fixed first. Are you serious about changing or just having a nice ritual baptism that leaves you the same as you were when you arrived here?"

What's most interesting is that the people don't seem to be offended and leave. For once they heed the words of the prophet, acknowledge they might be in the wrong and ask, "What then should we do?" True leadership makes people want to be better. John had to be quite heartened by their response.

He proceeds to tell them some very basic, ethical imperatives. We really did learn these in kindergarten.

- Share whatever you have so no one goes without while others have more than they need.
- Be fair. Don't overcharge to fill your pockets at the expense of others.
- Protect and guard equally. Don't misuse your position to bully and extort.

Interestingly, John speaks to neighborly care, business ethics and the proper use of power. How absolutely relevant are these very concerns today.

I was glad to see on the front page of Wednesday's Times Dispatch a picture and article about Richmonder and young mother Bea Gonzalez. She was so moved by the peril of families fleeing war-torn Syria that she is collecting kits of baby carriers, socks, hats, gloves and stuffed animals to be sent to Greece where families first arrive in Europe.

John's simple directive to the tax collectors – Be fair! – could easily be applied to the issue of workers' wages today, especially when compared to the exponential rise of CEOs' salaries.

And the few policemen across the country who have misused or abused their power would do well to listen to John when he says essentially, "Do the job you were hired and trained to do, and apply the same standards for all."

If we as individual people of faith and as Americans can search our own souls and acknowledge that we have chaff alongside the wheat that needs burning away with the Holy Spirit's fire, then even John's message can be good news.

Let us rejoice then, we brood of vipers, for we, too, can be cleansed from our less than Christian thoughts and actions by a Messiah who offers us instead the peace that passes all understanding. AMEN.