

“Rejoice”
Zephaniah 3:14-20,
Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

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Why do we light a pink candle on the Third Sunday in Advent? Anybody have the answer?

My reading this week suggested that we light the pink candle because it's the third week, and originally the season of Advent was a penitential season, a time to think about how bad we've been, our sins, and to think about how we want to come for forgiveness. We don't tend to think about Advent that way these days, but if you're in that kind of season, it's nice right in the middle—the third Sunday is about the middle—to take a minute and rejoice. At least rejoice that the season is half-way over. So we light a candle of joy, of rejoicing on the third Sunday. And yet as we read the scriptures, we realize that the scriptures are chosen to help us think about that other kind of season, that way of thinking about our need and who we are.

At least John, speaking with those folks who came to him in Judea, was that way. He was telling them to repent, to change their way. I think what he was saying, in his time anyway, was that idea of “repent,” turn to God, that what they were doing at the moment didn't quite work. Let me suggest at least one element of what they were doing at that point was pretty well-defined – what you need to do in relationship to God. If you wash right, if you go to the Temple and sacrifice right, if you do all these little tasks right, then you are OK with God. John was basically saying, “Turn away.”

First of all, that's a heavy burden that doesn't really work. The people must have felt that need, for they were coming to John to find a different way. Now, having heard him say “turn,” they say, “Turn where? What do we do?” I love his answer because it's pretty simple. If we look at it, he's basically saying care, share, and be fair, and you are preparing God's way. What do you do? You have to at least notice your neighbor in need—that's the caring part—to share your cloak or your food.

And then the tax collectors and soldiers say, “What about us?” John says, basically, be fair. Don't take more than your share, what you are allotted to do, don't extort. It's a fairly simple message, isn't it? Care, share, be fair. It's a wonderful, simple idea that he gives us that we're drawn toward and into.

When I think about what it is we want to do as we prepare for God, as we open our hearts to God, John says to start here. If you start with caring, sharing and being fair, now you are at least looking outward and beginning to open yourselves to God. He's saying prepare your hearts. Prepare for his coming. Even as we recognize Jesus has come, how do we prepare again? I don't think it's a bad thing to listen to John again. Care, share and be fair, and make ourselves available to God. I think the promise there is interesting as well. That when we do that, then God will come and God will be active. We know that Jesus has come. He changed all kinds of things for the people John was

talking to, and really he has changed all kinds of things for us as well, hasn't he? As we are invited to be those who care, share and be fair, we might expect that God will do something in our lives as well. I think that's what John goes on to talk about when he says, I'm not even good enough to untie his sandals. He says the one who's coming is going to do even more. We might summarize that as he's going to baptize us with fire and the Spirit. That's good news, John says. It doesn't always sound like good news to be baptized with fire, to have the chaff burned away.

I read that and recognize that there's a certain way John was talking about what was going to happen in Judea, and yet he's also talking about what's going to happen across the centuries in the lives of each of us. That as we open, as we hear what John is calling us to, as we open our hearts to Christ, as we begin to follow him, that baptism comes to us. I do think that it's good news, because oftentimes in my own life, I recognize that I have that chaff that I struggle with. I think of things like "I'm not good enough" or "I'll never live up to this or that," or the judgments I make on others—they will never be good enough. We have all kinds of that in our lives and it can influence how we live. I need some of that burned away. Some of that way in which I can never be handsome enough, I can never be smart enough, I can never speak well enough. It's nice to know that as I allow Christ in, as I recognize that as I just notice others and care, as I am willing to share of my life and be fair with others, that God will work on burning away that stuff that gets in the way, that sense that I'm never good enough, the judgment I make on others. As I allow God to baptize me with fire through Jesus, as I follow, that gets burned away.

I think there's a burning away of the negative in our lives as we allow Christ in and to follow him. There's also the baptism with the Spirit. It's both getting rid of the negative and going to the positive. The Spirit is the one who moves in our lives and will change us. We have a fairly simple activity to do: care, share, be fair and open ourselves to God, to follow Christ. It is then that we will be baptized with fire, that the negative will be burned away and the positive will take over. What does it say about what the Spirit will do? It will produce in us the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There's both the burning away of the stuff that gets in the way and there's a way in which the Spirit works in us and with us to make us new people.

When I first hear John preaching in the wilderness to repent, let God burn away the bad stuff, it doesn't sound like good news at first, but when I realize what it means to really let God in and to burn away the stuff that gets in the way and actually begin to lead me to be one who exhibits the gifts of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, it's an exciting thing. It's good news. It's then that I realize that there's a fairly simple thing God asked me to do: care, share, be fair and open myself to following Christ. And in doing that, allowing the Spirit to burn away and to lead, we have something we can rejoice in always. Amen.