

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

While our collect today asks God to “stir up” his power, our readings are stirring up some conflicting emotions. Both Zephaniah and Paul in his letter to the Philippians call on us to rejoice, but then we get a reality check with that buzz-kill, John the Baptist. We go from “do not worry” to “you brood of vipers.” There is a temptation to tell ourselves that John was talking to the Pharisees and tax collectors, not us. There are also those who might think that Paul's message of comfort was meant for others and not for us. We are wrong on both counts. The fact of the matter is, we are called to rejoice and to take stock. The two go hand in hand.

Let's start with John. “Brood of vipers” is harsh by most anyone's standards: “You snakes – why are you here? Did someone tell you to go see John and get right with God? What do you think this is, a revival meeting? You scared because you know God is getting his wrath up? You're saying the words but are you living the life? You got to do more than just be seen at church you know. Just coming out here ain't going to cut it.”

And while we're at it, don't think being the “offspring of Abraham” is going to help you. God can turn rocks into children of Abraham. What are *you* doing? What kind of fruit are you bearing? Me – I wouldn't know a pear try from an apple tree unless there were some pears hanging from it. Just seeing the outside doesn't help me much. I've got to see what's being produced. And if it's time to produce, and the tree doesn't produce, the tree is dead. If we aren't producing spiritual fruits, then we are spiritually dead. And dead trees get cut down and used for firewood. If you aren't producing apples, you can at least smoke some bacon. Okay, maybe John wouldn't have gone with bacon, that whole kosher thing, but you know what I mean.

Just like the Baptizer's audience, we need to hear some harsh truths once in a while and take stock of our own spiritual health. Are we producing fruit or are we fooling ourselves? Are we sharing out of our excess, or do we hoard it? Do we cheat people at work? Do we abuse our privileges? Are we using our gifts for God's glory and the furtherance of his kingdom? Or for our glory and the advance of our kingdoms? The question is just as relevant for us as for John's generation.

But keep reading. John doesn't stop with condemnation and self-examination. He doesn't let the people stop with following someone who will ask the hard questions and then give simple answers. It's not just about behaving the right way. That's just the beginning. The Messiah isn't coming to tell you what's wrong with you. And there is more to it than just behaving yourself. This stuff is washed away with water. One is coming who washes with fire. We can feel bad and promise to do better. And we probably really mean it – right now, while we are here together. But what happens on Monday?

Did you ever see the movie *The Breakfast Club*? It is about five high school students serving a Saturday detention. Each is the personification of a high school stereotype – the jock, the preppie, the nerd, and so on. They really bond over the experience and one of the characters asks that question – What happen on Monday? Will they still be friends? One girl tells him of course, but another student is honest – no, nothing will have changed. And there is the difference between what John was doing and what the real Messiah, the Christ is doing. John baptizes with water – and it changes people. The Christ baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit, and it transforms people.

It was Bishop Gray who first articulated that difference in a way I could hear. Changing

for the better is good, and a necessary part of transformation. But transformation is more than change. In Christ we are a new creation, not just a changed one. There will be changes to be sure, but it is more than change. It is something like that show where they send a family in need of a new house off for a week and completely redo the house. Sometimes, it is a remodel, a re-purposing of the space, maybe a new addition to give the family some more room. Other times, they level the place and build something new. That is transformation. That is what Christ calls us to – the transformation of our lives, not just a new coat of paint.

Amending our ways is good. Being generous, dealing fairly with others, not trying to cheat people to get ahead – these are good things and can be signs of transformation, but if we confuse them with the total of transformation, we will fall short. We are baptized with water, and that is good, but it is not all. Baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit, now that is something. And I am not saying that it hasn't happened, or isn't happening, but we can't assume it. If we rest on our status, like the Pharisees did on their status as children of Abraham, we might be in for a nasty shock. If God can raise up children of Abraham from rocks, Episcopalians can't be too much harder.

Keep in mind, I am talking about transformation, not salvation. There is a difference. In baptism, we are sealed as Christ's own forever, and nothing we do can change that. No, I am talking about how well we are living into that salvation. Salvation invites transformation, it doesn't compel it. And transformation requires work, both on our part and on God's. But we are equipped to do the work. And every Sunday we gather to praise God, to give him thanks, and to gather strength for the coming week, to do the work God has given us to do.

And that's where the rejoicing comes in. Because while we face the reality of being called to transformed lives – and realizing that we aren't through yet – we still rejoice, because God is working in our lives. Rejoice, the Lord is near. God's Holy Spirit resides in each of us. We don't have to worry, because we can bring everything to God in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.

So we find ourselves on a cusp. On the one hand, we need to be aware of our shortcomings, of the ways in which we are still being transformed, of the times we are not living fully into our salvation. On the other hand, we are redeemed, we are held in Christ's hand from which no power on heaven or earth can tear us against our will. Our task is to address our sins with neither despair nor complacency. We are sealed as Christ's own forever, but that does not mean that we don't disappoint our Lord. The trick, as it were, is to lose sight of neither aspect of our condition as redeemed sinners. As Martin Luther put it, *simul justus et peccator* at the same time justified yet a sinner.

We are called to rejoice, and it is right so to do. But we must not lose sight of our fallen nature. We are not to rest on our status, but to live into it. And we can be a brood of vipers, turning on each other and biting one another. But we must not lose sight that we are being transformed. We are not cast away but are constantly, lovingly being drawn in. We aid in our transformation when we share what we have with those who have not. We share in the work our Lord is doing in us when we treat others with fairness and respect. We do our part in the ministry of reconciliation when we are Christ to the world. “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us,” and we will rejoice. In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*