

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
December 12, 2021 Advent 3/Year C
Texts – Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

While driving along the Interstates down south, you occasionally see anonymously sponsored messages on huge billboards addressed to all of us. They are messages signed from God. We saw them again a few weeks ago when we were in South Carolina. “Why not drop by my house tomorrow morning before the game. God.” “Great wedding; hope I’m invited to the marriage. God.” And the one that might be my all-time favorite, “Don’t make me come down there. God.”

That last one might be an appropriate introduction for today, but with a significant twist. We cannot make God come down here. According to our Advent theology, God’s approach, God’s coming among us in the flesh, is imminent, regardless of what we do. And in Advent, we anticipate that event; we eagerly await it. But today we are given a little pause, and are invited to ask: Is this something we really want? Are we ready to embrace the crisis, the fire, and the judgment that are necessary preludes to the redemption God brings?

This Third Sunday of Advent is sometimes informally referred to as “Stirrup Sunday,” so called because of the first line of the collect for this day. “Stir up your power, O God, and with great might come among us.” Do we really know what we’re praying for when we say those words?

The gospel reading from Luke today gives us a picture of what that stirred-up power looks like. John the Baptist stands on the water’s edge shouting out to the crowd. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the passage packs a real punch: “Brood of snakes!” John says. What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your *life* that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

And then the passage ends with these words that seem so startlingly out of place given what we just heard: “So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the *good news* to the people.” Good News!? What Good News? How are words of judgment, fire, a coming crisis, indications of something good?

Blueberries give us a clue. As you all know, Downeast Maine proudly claims the title, “The Blueberry Capital of the World.” And for good reason. Blueberries are everywhere up there. The highly acidic, rocky soil combined with the bitterly cold winters create conditions perfect for them.

Now I know different people are loyal to their peculiar regional fruit. When I lived in South Carolina, the natives boasted about their peaches, and took every opportunity to remind others that South Carolina, not Georgia, grows the most and the best peaches in the country. The folks in North Carolina boasted about their crisp apples. Massachusetts is famous for cranberries, even though New Jersey actually produces more of them. And then there is Kentucky, where the fruit comes distilled and in a bottle. But in my book, there’s nothing better than a fresh pie made with Maine wild blueberries.

When we lived in Hancock County in the early ‘90’s, I always looked forward to the spectacular crimson color of the blueberry fields in fall, a stunning blaze across the landscape as far as the eye can see. That’s when the growers set their fields on fire. The plants are burned up. And what’s left after the burn are charred remains that soon will be blanketed with snow until April. Then in May and June, after the snows have melted and the sun has had a chance to begin warming the soil, the plants come back to life with new leaves, purged of weeds and dead wood, and ready to produce another crop of luscious fruit. The fire makes sense in the context of the overall life of the blueberry plant. Its purpose is not destruction; it is not to create burned up plant matter. Its purpose is to promote healthy plant production, which in turn bears good fruit. The fire, as awesome and frightening as it appears when you see an entire field aflame, is a good thing.

John’s message of judgment is like the fire. It only makes sense in the overall context of God’s redemption. It is a necessary prelude to a healthy spiritual life, which in turn produces the good fruit, the hallmark of the Body of Christ.

I know that many of us cringe when we hear the word, “judgment,” and for very understandable reasons. Our daily experience of judgment in this life is often negative and, for some, relentless. Some feel like they’re under judgment all the time: from parents or adult children, spouses, friends, and very often even from themselves. In fact, often we are our own harshest judge. And living under the constant weight of judgment from every direction over time can be crushing. Some might argue that it’s a leading stress factor that contributes to the development of disease. So, the last thing we need is to come to church and be bombarded with another message of judgment, this time from the ultimate judge. “Don’t make me come down there,” as the billboard says.

But John the Baptist’s message of God’s impending judgment is of a completely different sort. From a faith perspective, judgment can be legitimately proclaimed only in the context of redemption, of drawing people back into a circle of reconciliation. It’s not an excuse to attack others and then walk away, leaving a swath of destructive guilt and shame.

The word judgment literally refers to the act of separation, specifically of taking away that which is not helpful or useful. The burning of the blueberry fields accomplishes that by separating out and eliminating that which over time will stunt the growth and production of the plant. The same must be accomplished in each one of us, if we are to be truly ready to bear the fruit of God with us. The dead wood of destructive habits, the decaying leaves of unhealthy relationships, and the creeping mold of new and enticing distractions in our lives all have to be cleared out from time to time. And what is often so difficult is that we become attached to these things and don’t want to let them go. It’s for good reason that when the word “judgment” appears in the New Testament, it’s often the translation of a word that means crisis. It surely feels like a crisis when all of these familiar props are suddenly taken away. It involves tumult, grief, and sometimes a sense of panic.

John tells the crowds that there can be no special exemption from all this, no special status anyone can claim to avoid the spiritual fire. Don’t think you can fall back on your heritage from Abraham, he tells the crowd. That’s nothing! He could just as well be saying to us, don’t rest in your comfortable Christianity. What good is your Episcopal blue blood ancestry if it doesn’t lead you into genuine crisis, into a sense of urgency?

And when the necessary crisis comes, it’s natural to feel we need to retreat, to lie dormant and invisible for a while under the protection of a blanket of snow, like blueberry plants in winter. My hope is that such a blanket might come in the form of the Christian community, at St. Margaret’s, an environment of quiet, rest, and prayer for those who are healing from their time of crisis.

John the Baptist does not let us stay in retreat forever, though. Luke’s version of the story includes something unique and crucial. After he preaches his message of crisis, the crowds ask John, “What then should we do?” John’s responses are utterly simple. They involve inviting all of us to act in the world in such a way that reflects God’s real presence with us. Whoever has two coats, share with any who has none. Whoever has food must do likewise. Don’t succumb to the cancer of greed or use your power to exploit and do violence to those who are vulnerable.” What you are to do is to bear fruit worthy of repentance, fruit that emerges in the spring on the other side of the fire. Redemption, in other words, has necessary social implications. It does not end with the accomplishment of my own spiritual purging. That’s the necessary prelude to what comes next. And what comes next is nothing less than a new life characterized by justice and mercy and love.

Do you see now how this is Good News? That which feels like crisis – and in fact is crisis! – is what leads to transformation, not only of us as individuals, but also of us as a community, as a world. The Realm of God, which John the Baptist came to announce and Jesus the Christ came to bring, is upon us. Listen to the voice crying in the wilderness. He is calling to you. He is calling to me. And his message is, get ready. Get ready for fire. Get ready for tumult. Get ready for transformation. Get ready for joy. Get ready for Immanuel. Get ready for God.