

**THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, PROPER 10, YEAR C, RCL**  
**ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; CANTICLE 9; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 3:7-18**  
**THE REV. DANAE ASHLEY**  
**DECEMBER 13, 2015**

**Prepare**

***A Blessing for Advent***

Strange how one word  
will so hollow you out.  
But this word  
has been in the wilderness  
for months.  
Years.

This word is what remained  
after everything else  
was worn away  
by sand and stone.  
It is what withstood  
the glaring of sun by day,  
the weeping loneliness of  
the moon at night.

Now it comes to you  
racing out of the wild,  
eyes blazing  
and waving its arms,  
its voice ragged with desert  
but piercing and loud

—Jan Richardson  
from *Circle of Grace*

- See more at: <http://adventdoor.com/2015/11/29/advent-2-a-blessing-for-preparing/#sthash.RRfSX8eK.dpuf>

as it speaks itself  
again and again:

*Prepare, prepare.*

It may feel like  
the word is leveling you,  
emptying you  
as it asks you  
to give up  
what you have known.

It is impolite  
and hardly tame,  
but when it falls  
upon your lips  
you will wonder  
at the sweetness,

like honey  
that finds its way  
into the hunger  
you had not known  
was there.

Have you ever heard of the saying, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know”? Networking has been an established social function in society for as long as there have been people. We often use our connections to get us into social circles and places that we might have difficulty getting into alone. We have seen on television shows and in the media, people getting things they want because of their connections through family or other social circles. Most of us have probably done the same thing ourselves. We would rather go with who we know or someone that we trust knows than go to a stranger for a haircut or to get our car fixed. That sort of networking is harmless, right?

But when does it cross the line? What about being connected to a group or person that seems to demand a certain type of respect, which may be in reality, arrogance and entitlement? Have you ever

heard someone say, “Don’t you know who I am?” or witnessed someone getting excused from what would normally be inexcusable behavior because of their connections to a family, community, or even a belief system? It doesn’t just happen on TV, it happens anywhere there are people...and it isn’t just a modern day issue.

We hear John the Baptist in our Gospel today chastising the crowds before him for this very thing. “You brood of vipers!” he accuses. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

What vivid imagery! What a dire warning. But most of all, what a reminder of the power of God. John is telling the crowd and telling us that what our ancestors have done in the past doesn’t matter now. It is what we do in the present that matters. There is an immediacy in John’s declarations. God’s power is being stirred up and we don’t know what form it is going to take or what the outcome will be. We are powerless over the mystery of God.

Like any human being that feels threatened, the people in the crowd want to avoid judgment, avoid God’s wrath, and avoid pain. They panic. Human nature hasn’t changed much over the centuries. We still feel the same way in the face of the unknown. We want to control it, we want to analyze it, and we want to have power over it. When we can’t do that, we transmit our anxieties to others that we think we can control and have power over. Exploitation makes us feel better. It seems as if greed, accumulation of material things, and apathy toward others can create a protective shield around the fearful trembling of our distorted hearts. Like the strange, frightening picture in Oscar Wilde’s story of Dorian Gray, our true selves, our inner selves that should be turning to God, end up atrophied and diseased as we slowly become monsters of our own making, while everything on the outside seems to be going along swimmingly.

“What then should we do?” We ask with the despairing crowds. John tells us we must bear fruits worthy of repentance. We must turn to God—our hope and our salvation. We must do three things: be honest (“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you”), be kind (Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none...), and work hard (“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages”). Really? That’s all?

John, in essence, tells the crowds, the tax collectors, and soldiers that the first step to a restored community as God intended is to re-distribute wealth and stop exploitation. Each individual’s decision is key—it is the idea we have today of thinking globally, but acting locally. Systems don’t change all at once, but through one person at a time. This may be something as small as being honest if a cashier gives you too much change back or going through your closet to give away clothes that another can use or giving someone a smile. Every small action leads to larger transformation, not just of ourselves, but of the world around us.

We are to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord and our hearts are filled with expectation and questioning. We know the answer to the crowds’ question of “Who is the Messiah?” because we have heard this Gospel story before. Yet, even though we know that God is about to do something new by being with us in the flesh—Immanuel—God with us, and we claim to believe that God is still doing something new—revealing, redeeming, sustaining, and moving in the present time—what then are the fruits of our repentance? We hear the prophet Zephaniah and the prophet Isaiah

proclaiming the goodness of the Lord in our Scriptures today—what hope they hold! “The Lord is in your midst,” Zephaniah exults. How then, do our hearts respond? Are we living like we believe this?

Sometimes it seems like the Gospels are from a different time and different place and are not applicable to the sophisticated world we live in today. Of course, they are from a different time and different place, but what we often forget is that the same God that came among us back then is in our midst now, stirring up power, doing new things. We’re not doing anything new that God hasn’t encountered before—it’s human nature—but the God of the Gospels is the God of the 1st and the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is still calling us to transformation.

This is an exciting time! We do not know how God will stir things up—but we do know that God’s work always comes to good. If we don’t clear a path, then how will we be able to respond with joy when the Lord is in our midst? How will we be able to hear the clear call of transformation in our lives and in the community around us if our shields are up? How will we be able to notice the hunger that we didn’t know was there?

We have the choice to allow God to come afresh into our lives, giving us new eyes, deeper wisdom, and profound compassion. We have the ability to repent anew and to affirm the covenant made in our baptism, proclaiming the Good News to all people. This is no longer our parents’ choice or our grandparents’ choice or our ancestors’ choice—we cannot rest on their laurels. The choice is ours. May we choose honesty, kindness, and hard work. May we choose wisely. AMEN.