

December 12, 2021 3rd Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 12:2-6,
Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

[Quotes and ideas from two pieces by Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2030-what-then-should-we-do> (posted 12/9/18) and <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3246-rejoice-always> (posted 12/5/21).]

Grace and peace, beyond our understanding, to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

If you listen carefully, week after week, during this season of Advent,

you may notice some similarity in the prayers at the start of our service.

The classic language of Advent prayers begins: *Stir up...*

Stir up your power, O Christ and Come... That was the first week.

Then, *Stir up our hearts, O God, to prepare the way.*

Then today, *Stir up the wills of your faithful people, O God, and open our ears.*

A friend tells me about an 85 year old woman who carefully tweaks these prayers.

She takes them another step:

Stir up your power, O Christ, she prays, and DISTURB! Stir up your power, and Disturb.

I'm moved by this woman's honesty, for there is a tension going on in today's lessons—

We'd best be disturbed.

This Third Sunday of Advent is sometimes called Guadete Sunday.

Guadete in Latin means Rejoice.

As Intern Emily shared, it's the Sunday when we light the pink candle, the candle of joy.

In this season of waiting and preparation, traditionally penitence,

this Third Sunday is a light spotter as we near the birth of Jesus.

The word Guadete is an imperative, a command, really, Rejoice.

As in Paul's words from prison to the people of Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I say Rejoice."

That theme of joy threads through these readings. Just listen:

"Surely God is my salvation," Isaiah declares, "I will trust and not be afraid."

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

And most of book of Zephaniah is judgment for sin.

But today's reading, from nearly the conclusion, after the repentance, there is joy, much joy.

Zephaniah reads like a lullaby to the people, singing them the promises, dreaming of what they can be.:

where the outcast are gathered, where shame is turned into praise.

Keep in mind that biblical joy and rejoicing aren't the same as our happiness, they go so much deeper. We can hear "Rejoice, again I say rejoice" and there is still space for us to bring our grief and our yearning, our oppression, our depression, our anxiety about getting it all done.

I find that helpful given the reality of these days, indeed this week:

The devastation of tornadoes churning to our south—and communities grieving in the aftermath.

Many, many beloveds dying of COVID—and health care workers so very tired.

The trial.

Teachers and students alike, stressed, stretched thin, and breaking.

Bring it all to these lessons, for this joy is so much deeper.

Stir up the wills of your people, and come, O God, come and disturb.

All this joy, this rejoicing, and here comes John the Baptist ... and he disturbs.

Last week we heard that classic Advent call of John, Prepare the way of the Lord.

Intern Emily noted in her sermon that John the Baptist isn't one of these favored Christmas figures, but rather a bit of an intruder, crashing in on the season with strong, harsh words.

This week John just continues that, and to new holiday levels, I'd add!

As the meme says, "Happy Advent, you brood of vipers!"

The crowds stream out to John by the River Jordan. He's lashing out, warning of the fires.

And then there is this turning point, a hinge, where the crowd wonders aloud in all sincerity:

"John, What then should we do?"

Oh, that's a great question. What then should we do?

Bear fruit.

Give away your extra coat.

Share your food, John tells them.

And then people get more specific.

The tax collectors want to know what they should do

The soldiers wonder, too.

Collect the taxes due, not extra, no more skimming off the top.

Do your work fairly, not threatening, not accusing falsely.

There's this amazing specificity here, where John, with a lovely blend of patience and fire

enumerates just what they should do to change the systems within which they live and work.

John is all about disturbing us, all about stirring us up.

He says it's Good News, but it doesn't sound like such good news...

...Unless you're the one who needs a coat, or is hungry or you've been under the thumb of the soldiers.

Then it's sweet liberation.

And, I'd add, sometimes there's some sweet liberation in being disturbed,

In righting systems, broken systems.

making the changes that need to be made,

in doing good, hard work with authenticity and honesty,

Curiously, when John comes to disturb, he doesn't hand us itchy camel hair and a bowl of locusts and invite us to join him in the wilderness.

Rather, he sends those crowds, those tax collectors, those mercenary soldiers back home.

Read John the Baptist's disturbing words, and there's a presence, a now, in his message.

The Kingdom of God is not "out there" but rather here, now, within and among us.

"God cares how we live here," writes Debie Thomas.

It's all within God's care.

In baptism, God claims us.

You belong to God; you always have and you always will, and now the mark of + Christ is on you.

John wants to make doubly sure that all those folks following him into the wilderness know well just how serious and life-altering baptism is.

There's the baptism of John, but then he explains the baptism that Jesus brings.

The Message Bible describes Jesus' baptism as "changing you from the inside out."

Can people tell? Is your life changed? Does grace permeate?

This morning Zac and Maria Wright bring their beloved child Malakai for baptism.

They dedicate this little one to God, and entrust Malakai to God's grace, to God's eternal love and care.

On the one hand, it's sweet, O yes! Amen.

Sweet for Malakai, and for each of us.

And, friends, it's disturbing, disturbing to our ho hum ways of getting along.

For in baptism we are changed by this love, by this joy, by this grace...

and, at its best, it stirs us up, it disturbs!

I appreciate Debie Thomas' words. She writes:

"Joy requires us to sidestep sentimentality and cynicism alike.

It requires that we hold onto two realities at once:

the reality of the world's brokenness in one hand,
and the reality of God's love in the other.”

She continues: “Joy is what happens when we daily live into the belief that God can and will bridge the gap
between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes.

It is a posture, an orientation, a practice.

A willingness to sit gently but persistently in the tension of the ‘not yet,’

trusting that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds
in that in-between place for as long as it takes.”

Jesus is coming, dear ones.

His baring cries hold the deepest joy imaginable,
and demand nothing less than our lives.

That's Good News, dear friends.

Disturbing news, and Good News. May we be stirred! Amen.