

## **Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church**

**Advent 3, December 12, 2021**

### **READINGS:**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6)

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Paul said to the church at Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

The prophet Zephaniah wrote, "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel....the Lord...will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exalt over you with loud singing as on a day of festival."

The prophet Isaiah sings, "Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid."

And in today's collect we pray, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us..."

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, known for centuries in the Roman Catholic church and still kept today by our Anglican sisters and brothers and some

Episcopal parishes as Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete” means “Rejoice” in Latin, and this Sunday, a little like “Refreshment Sunday” in Lent, traditionally is marked by scripture readings about rejoicing and good news, and in some places by the use of a rose-colored candle instead of dark blue or purple in the Advent Wreath, and rose colored altar hangings and clergy vestments.

Zephaniah is one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament. His prophetic ministry occurred in the first part of the reign of King Josiah, from about 640 to 630 years before the birth of Christ. Like Amos, his prophecies are almost exclusively predictions of judgement. Yet, just listen to the beautiful psalm we hear from him today!

The Lord your God is in your midst! He will rejoice over you with gladness! He will renew you in his love! He will exalt over you with loud singing as on a festival day!

My goodness! God will sing because of you! Have you ever thought that God might be singing because of you, or the person sitting next to you? Jesuit priest John Foley tells us, “God’s gladness sings out joyfully at every instant, and his song is the earth, the galaxies, the people and plants.” God has created us, and sent his Son Jesus to redeem us and lead us home to him. We, each and together, are part of God’s song! That is cause for Gaudete – for Rejoicing!

But, I think we all know we do not make God sing all the time! John the Baptizer calls the people coming for baptism a “Brood of vipers,” and warns them that they must “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He knows, and they know, that just like us, they are “sorely hindered by their sins.” That is not cause to rejoice.

So, they ask him what they should be doing, right now! And, he gives them clear directions for their lives. His directions are very simple to understand, yet hard, sometimes, to do! Don’t cheat! Don’t extort! Don’t falsely accuse! Be content with your wages! Be generous and share! Let your life sing!

Those directions work just as well for us today. In God’s kingdom, each of our lives and what we do with them matters. Whoever we are, whether members of

the crowd, soldiers, tax collectors, or any other of a thousand occupations, our job for the kingdom is to live justly, and to share our resources with others.

Then John tells his followers the good news! He will baptize them with water as a sign of repentance, but the one who is coming, whose sandals he is not fit to untie, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, will clear his threshing floor, gather the “wheat” into his granary, and burn the “chaff” with fire. Good news, assuming you are wheat. Not so good, we sometimes think, for the chaff!

But there is another way to hear John’s words. I think this way is important! Jesuit priest John Kavanagh says he “used to think this passage referred to the contrast between the saved and the lost.” He says his prayer was “to be in the happy granary, not burnt in the fire.” He goes on to say, “But this is clearly a misrepresentation of the Baptist’s words. Fire is not the fate of the lost, but the refining of the blessed. We all have our chaff, our dross, our waste. We all have our winnowing. And it is the fire of Christ that will burn it away. The burdens we carry do not make us unfit for Advent’s message. They qualify us as prime candidates.” That is cause for Gaudete – for Rejoicing!

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” says Saint Paul. Be kind to all. Lose your anxiety. Make all your requests known to God. Thank God as though he has already granted those requests you made, and God’s peace will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. That guarding is cause for Gaudete – for Rejoicing!

People of God, the Lord Jesus has come with great power to live among us. He comes to us every day to help us and deliver us and refine us. As the prophet Isaiah tells us, we can trust in him, for he is the Holy One of Israel, and he surely saves us. And, we have his promise that he will come to us again.

It is not for us to know just when he will return. Our job while we wait is to let our lives sing, and to let God sing because of us! We are each a part of God’s song.

That is truly cause for Gaudete – for Rejoicing!

Amen.