Advent 3 All Saints’ Church

December 16, 2018 Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Philippians 4:4-7

Canticle 9: Isaiah 12:2-6 Luke 3:7-18

Let us trust the Lord and not be afraid.

“Rejoice in the Lord Always; again I will say, Rejoice.” When Paul writes these words to his fledgling church in Philippi, he is writing by candlelight from the cell of a dark prison in Rome. It’s difficult to imagine such hope in the face of such possible despair, defeat, and ruin.

“Rejoice, Paul writes, even though he has no idea of his own fate. He has no idea whether he will be rescued, like he was before, with God unlocking inner cell doors by earthquakes and jailers converting to liberators before his very eyes, **OR** whether he will waste away, tied to chains and to darkness and to a brutal end. For Paul, it doesn’t matter. He trusts he’s in God’s hands which gives him great joy. Rejoice, the Lord is always near. “Don’t worry,” he tells us.

Paul knows the peace of God which surpasses all understanding because this peace has nothing to do with his circumstances and everything to do with the sustaining presence of the Living Lord, the fire of the Holy Spirit. Paul wants to pass this joy, this gladness, this longing, this reassurance in thanksgiving and supplications… on… to pay it forward.

Sometimes paying it forward is not easy. People are not ready to receive this gift; they don’t believe life could be filled with joyful possibilities; they did nothing to deserve such promise; they are unworthy or maybe even worse, they feel they are being tricked, manipulated, and played as a fool, so they put up their guard and grit their teeth.

I remember one day visiting an elderly man in the hospital. He had made a request for a chaplain to visit, and I came into his room, young and naïve, bouncing in, full of possibilities and hope. I assumed he had called a chaplain because he wanted to pray. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He had no access to prayer. God was damning him; there was nothing he could do; he was no better than the brood of vipers whom John the Baptist condemned in the wilderness. He had relied too much on his privilege, his power, his money, his ancestry to get out of life what he wanted, and now he was left bereft with nothing, no family, no friends, alone, discarded and dying. A sad death at that, and one he deserved. And for sure, his life not worthy of forgiveness.

There was nothing I could do to convince him otherwise. And every day he called for me, and every day I went. And I listened. And every day he said the same thing. Soon, I discovered that this was his prayer: Damning himself. He wanted me to join him in this prayer.

During our visits, I learned that he had a son who had died during the Vietnam War. One day, I asked him what he would do if his son walked through the door…. right now? His eyes filled up immediately with tears. I then said, that his son had survived the war, but was so angry at him, his dad, he kept his survival a secret.

“It wouldn’t matter. I’d love to see my son.”

“What if he had lived his life selfishly,” I asked, “taking what he could, committing sins along the way. He had married, had children, yet he had hurt many and he wasn’t very repentant, nor cognizant of his responsibility or guilt. He had opportunities to find you and to connect with you, but he did neither. You didn’t matter.

“But he’s walking through these doors right now?”

“Right now. Would you receive him?”

“You just can’t imagine. I would want nothing more, but to see my son alive and to hold him close.”

I waited for him to make the connection. He didn’t. Five minutes went by.

And then I asked, “If you can receive your son after so much rejection and betrayal and duplicity on his part, if you can love him, no matter what he has done, and you want to hold him, and be with him, why wouldn’t God receive you and love you and hold you close?”

He got it. “Oh my God, what must I do?”

Have you ever wondered why after John the Baptist called all those in the crowd, “brood of vipers,” insulted the crowd by exposing their vulnerabilities and delusions and sins, and then who told them that God was taking the ax to the root of their lives and every life that did not bear good fruit God was cutting it down and throwing it in the fire….. why after all this, the crowd didn’t reject John? Call him names? Scream profanities at him and walk away?

I think the members of the crowd are no different than my wayward father, lost and hurting and separated from the love of God and somehow wanting to find their way back, but not knowing how. They don’t know the way, but they are very aware of how much they are hurting. And how much need they have to connect and to feel loved. They feel their emptiness and despair and confusion. Yet, there seems to be a step before one can confess one’s sins and ask for repentance. They ask, “What then shall we do?”

Our Baptizer John responds to them by advising that they cling to moral acts. Do the right thing. Be responsible. Don’t cheat. Share your food. Don’t make false accusations. Be satisfied with your wages; don’t extort money from others.

All good advice, but I don’t think that’s the step one needs to take to find the way back to God. It’s not what my wayward father needed to hear. If not this, then what? John has no idea. His idea of holiness is not much different than many of ours.

“I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” John is equating Jesus with the Holy of Holies- separate/apart. That sacred place in the Temple where only the High Priest can go- once a year. Wearing his finest vestments, he would back into the holy place, keeping his eyes downcast, lest he accidently see the glory of God and be struck. And there he would offer sacrifices on behalf of his community so that all could be forgiven.

Our Jesus, dear Jesus, has such a different idea of what holy is! If only John had lived to see it, he wouldn’t have believed it.

What does this Holy One do? Jesus, the Holy of Holies? He eats with sinners and prostitutes. He befriends the poor, the dirty and the sick. He lays his hands on them. Remember the woman hemorrhaging? …. Unclean, yet he praises her courage to touch him as a statement of faith. He holds lepers dear. None of them were struck down dead. He cures them, heals them, forgives them. He calls tax collectors down from trees to dine with them.

He allows Mary to do what John the Baptist couldn’t imagine. She takes off his sandals and washes his feet with oils and perfumes and dries them with her hair. John the Baptist would be rolling in his grave. He has no idea how radical Jesus is going to be with love and forgiveness and second chances and hope and invitation. Jesus wants to embrace you fully. This embrace is holy, sacred, and brings about a peace that surpasses all understanding.

And then what does he do on the last day of his life? Strips down to his underwear and goes to each one of his disciples…. To each one of us…. He bends down and takes off our sandals and washes our feet. No one was struck down dead, but rather given the path to forgiveness and life. Were we worthy? Of course not. It doesn’t matter. That’s not Jesus’ criteria.

He takes all our sins, unmerited that we are, and carries them to the cross, and on our behalf liberates us to live a life that Paul claims is full of joy and heart and thanksgiving.

In the Prayer of Humble Access, we say “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.” Nothing could be truer, and it’s not about our unworthiness but God’s mercy.

Mercy, mercy, mercy. We are not worthy- never will be. “What then shall we do?” Take the step toward repenting by falling into Mercy. Jesus is well aware of this needed space. Jesus knows. He invites us in. Jesus died for us so that we could live in Mercy. AMEN