

**REPENTENCE AND JOY**  
**December 13, 2009**  
**Advent 3C**

**Texts:** *Zephaniah 3:13-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18*

Today, on this Third Sunday in Advent, we lit the candle of joy. The candle "*reminds us that Christ came, and is coming, so that all people might have a rich and abundant life. We thank God for the hope he gives us, for the peace he bestows, and for the joy he pours into our hearts.*" Whenever I hear the word joy this close to Christmas, I think of that favorite Christmas hymn, *Joy to the World:*

*Joy to the World, the Lord is Come  
Let earth receive her king.  
Let every heart prepare him room.  
And heaven and nature sing*

These words were written by English hymn writer Isaac Watts who lived from 1674 to 1746. It is said that he could not endure the dreary tone of English Protestant worship so began to write hymns, something that had been done by German Lutherans since the 1500's.

Joy to the World is based on Psalm 98, which reads in part: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all the earth; make a loud noise and rejoice and sing praise..." He reshapes these words and invites us to sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing."

These words of Joy to the World capture the essence of our lessons for today. In this Advent season of preparing, we are reminded of the joy that comes in Christ Jesus. We are also reminded of how we are to prepare by cleansing our hearts making room to receive this joy.

At the center of our lessons is John the Baptist, the one who comes as a prophet to give to the world a message of great importance. John's message actually has two parts. The first part of the message is that the promised Messiah, the "anointed one" of God is at hand. The second message is that radical preparations must be made in order to receive the Messiah. The season of Advent begins again the story of our salvation in Christ. John appears in the midst of the covenant community and shouts out, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!" The Lord is breaking into human history to reconcile God's rebellious people to God. Anyone who is receptive to a relationship with God must renounce the self-centered ways of the past and begin to live a life that is in line with God's ways and will.

Our English word "repent" comes from the French word, "repense" which means, "think again." In order to repent we must first look at the way we have been

thinking – our assumptions about priorities, about what is important in life. We must then look closely at our lives: How have we been living them? Where are we headed? What gives our lives focus? Are our lives directed by God or by our own self-serving ends? What do our lives have to offer God?

These questions capture the essence of the purpose of Advent. God comes to us in Jesus Christ. But to receive him, we must turn toward God. Repentance, then, has the sense of turning around, turning away from the old priorities and actions to new priorities and new actions which are centered on God's will instead of our own. As Watts writes in his third verse of his hymn:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found*

These words remind us of the need to change the way we live our lives. John the Baptists call to repent assumes that new and ethical actions will replace the old, self-centered ways. It demands that we show the integrity of our repentance by replacing self-centeredness with God-centeredness. As John point out in our Gospel reading, being God-centered results in actions that are neighbor-centered.

Perhaps all of this emphasis on repentance may cause you to wonder where the joy of Advent then is. What is the connection between repentance and joy, a joy that is experienced by all of the world, and by the entire universe? The answer is this, whenever we repent, we restore relationships. We restore our relationship with God. And we restore relationships with others. When relationships are restored, there is harmony and balance. Nobody wins; nobody loses. All can benefit from the goodness of God's creation.

Another benefit of restored relationships is that we can find joy. The words from the prophet Zephaniah remind us that God's salvation is at the gates and the road to repentance leads to joy. The people rejoice because of the presence of God. And God rejoices over the restored relationship with his people. Zephaniah writes:

The Lord your God, is in your midst...  
The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness,  
The Lord will renew you with his love,  
The Lord will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival

In the second stanza of his hymn, Isaac Watts writes of this coming of the Lord:

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!  
Let men their songs employ;

While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy.

These words speak profoundly of the kind of joy that comes from living a repentant life. When we rethink our lives and when we work to establish justice in our relationships with our neighbors the whole universe benefits. The vision is this: that all will sing of the joy that is ours when our relationship to God is restored.

Thanks be to God for hope, peace and joy.

Amen.