

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Canticle *"The First Song of Isaiah"* Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:7-18  
*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

Rejoice! Again I say rejoice! Rejoice, rejoice, Emanuel will come to thee, O people of God.

Last week I suggested that you try to identify with the Bible characters we encounter in our readings for this season of Advent, and Christmas, too. Can you find their hopes and dreams in your own lives? Do you perhaps have similar expectations? Would you have acted and reacted as they did? And specifically last week I invited you to consider the Zechariah family, the father and mother and their son, John, who went on to fame, but not fortune, as the Judean baptizer. Zechariah, remember, was a priest in the temple, who displayed such disbelief and shock when the angel told him that his son, who needed to be named 'John', would become the forerunner of the Messiah, that he was made temporarily mute, to his distress and that of his friends and neighbors. They all expected that the baby boy would be named after his father, but Zechariah wrote "His name is John!" and immediately regained his voice. Can you identify with his shock and awe? Can you feel, too, his frustration?

And his wife Elizabeth, who just happens to be maiden Mary's cousin, who never thought she would be able to have children, and yet who becomes pregnant. Can you imagine her joy? Have you ever found such joy when a miracle has happened for you? Despite years of hoping and praying? Despite repeated disappointments? Has your life ever become pregnant with new possibilities and opportunities? Did you adequately rejoice? Have you expressed your gratitude to God, from whom all blessings flow? And then there is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the miracle child who will be born to them in their later years. We hear in the scriptural story that when Mary, who though she herself might be pregnant, comes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, that John, still in his mother's uterus, jumps for joy. Even before he is born, John is excited by the prospect that his cousin will turn out to be the long-awaited Messiah, and that he will be around to see it! Well, some thirty years later, John is still excited. And so convinced, in fact, that he is knee-deep in the river, devoting his life and his reputation to preparing folks for Jesus' mission among them. He has been trying to be patient, but when will his cousin finally show up? He keeps watching over his shoulder for him, but it sounds as if all that waiting is making him a bit cranky. Can you identify with that?

In today's gospel reading from Luke we meet some new characters in our story, in fact a whole crowd of them. People are coming to the river to see what all the fuss is about, and John the Baptizer calls them 'a brood of vipers.' Among them, apparently, are even some soldiers, and some tax-collectors. He considers them all hypocrites, who, though they claim to be waiting for the Messiah, wouldn't even give you the time of day or the coat off their backs. They are waiting, but not expectantly. In fact, it appears that their waiting has become institutionalized. They have, they believe, Abraham and all the patriarchs of the faith as their models, and the prophets, too, and are reassured by that. But the institutional practice of their faith has become only about the *virtue* of waiting, not so much about the joy of God's great victories and miracles to come. Their faith is built on the past, not on the future. Their prayers are rooted in traditions, not in the expectation of fresh miracles. Even when they have heard the words of the prophet Zephaniah, as

we did this morning, they seem not to appreciate the future tense of it all: 'I *will* deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I *will* save the lame and gather the outcast, and I *will* change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I *will* bring you home, at that time when I gather you.

Waiting has just become a characteristic of their liturgical system, of their theology. They say the words, but they don't really live them. Rather than lively expectation, they have settled for systemic waiting. Rather than rejoicing in the possibilities of God's dream, they have accepted the relative comfort of the status quo. Can you identify with *them*? Has our practice of Advent become something like that? Or are we, like John the Baptist, excited about the future we will share with the Savior? By the way, John calls them snakes in the grass, but he does not turn them away, does he? Hey, they may not yet appreciate the joy of the coming miracles, nor the importance of their own ministry and witness, but at least they have shown up! Even if it's just curiosity, they have expressed an interest in seeking the truth, and have taken the time and inconvenient effort to come to the River. Can you identify with that? Is your own faithfulness motivated by longing for a role in God's great and glorious dream? Are you searching for a way to be a part of God's will? Is your observance of this Advent-time based on the real possibility that God wants Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace to enter and rule your life? And, when we light that fifth candle, the white one there in the middle of the Advent wreath, the representation and symbol of the Light of Christ, [when we light it,] will you be able to really feel its significance beyond its instructional, traditional, liturgical use? In other words, will you be able to receive the miracles of which it means to remind us?

Pastor Tim Schenek is the author of the Book we have been studying on Thursday evenings this Advent season, led by Colette Coppola. He has titled the book Dog in the manger, finding God in Christmas chaos. Now, I'm pretty sure that Pastor Tim is using the word 'chaos' in a playful way; his book is, after all, a faithfully playful one. But, whether intentionally or not, he has highlighted one of Christianity's great truths: Chaos is the antithesis of God's dream. Since the beginning of time, God has creatively been displacing chaos with goodness. The creative gift of the Savior, for example, is a measure of that displacement. Chaos can only exist in the absence of God's presence. And the problem with chaos, the problem with a chaotic existence, is that like a tornado, a whirlpool, or even like a black hole, chaos creates a vacuum, a vacuum into which despair, distrust, and even evil are perilously drawn. God's creative dream intends to fill that gap, that vacuum, with faithful and universal goodness. And Advent encourages us to prepare the world for God's creative miracles by joining the dream and being God's agents. We have the ministry of filling in those gaps. Paul writes to the Philippians: 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone'. Isaiah sings: 'Make God's deeds known among the peoples'. John the Baptist preaches: 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Advent may involve waiting, but while you're waiting, displace chaos with good news. While you're expectantly waiting, actively draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. While you're waiting, disperse the gloomy clouds of night. Try being those characters. Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel, God's loving presence, will come to us, O people of God. Amen.