



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

13. December, 2009. Advent III
Title: "Get With It...God is With Us!"
Text: Zechariah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18



J.J.

We are at the midpoint of the Season of Advent. This Sunday is known as "Rose Sunday," the Sunday for rejoicing. In years gone by the color for Advent was purple (some of us still remember that; and others of us will not let go of that). That was back when Advent was considered a penitential season, like Lent, but not quite as strict, and, thank God, not quite as long, and it was OK to sneak a cookie while baking them for Christmas, or to clean out the frosting bowl. We knew when Advent III arrived, because, as a young acolyte, I got to light the pink candle. Since Vatican II, however, when penance was no longer the emphasis, we have gone from purple to blue, but the emphasis for this Sunday is still on "rejoicing."

Indeed, Advent—and not only this Sunday, but the entire Season of Advent--Advent is a time for joy, and not just because Black Friday sales were up and we're buying more, or because we hope that Santa will bring us the right present (and, by the way, all of that is OK . . . I enjoy celebrating Christmas with the world—the world knows how to party, and I enjoy my continuation of the Christmas celebration long after the world has put Christmas away in a box for another year) . . . Advent is a time for joy and not just because we're anticipating the birth of Jesus (even if there is a sign up in the Castro Valley hills that proclaims: "Jesus is the Reason for the Season"). But, Advent is a time for joy because, as the Prophet Zephaniah tells us: "Shout for joy because God is already in your midst. Now, Zephaniah was speaking to a people who were burdened with war and destruction and displacement. It was not a good time in which to live. Their lives had gone to hell in a hand basket and their hopes had been dashed to pieces. They were in no mood to "Shout for joy" . . . or to "Sing joyfully" . . . or to "be glad and to exult." Much like the world in which we live today: a world burdened with war and destruction. We ourselves are probably as skeptical about peace and restoration as were they—perhaps even more so. Shout for joy? Sing joyfully? Be glad and exult? Come on prophet, ***Get With It!***

And then Paul comes along and also calls us to rejoice. In fact, he suggests that we should rejoice always, because the Lord is near. Paul, of course, was thinking about Christ's final return: Jesus is about to come back, says Paul, any time now—like maybe tomorrow—and so rejoice; be happy. Well, Paul . . . it didn't quite happen that way, did it? All of your wonderful rhetoric was nothing more than an empty promise—not unlike the empty promises we hear in our day. Rejoice always? And again you say, "Rejoice!" Well . . . tell that to the person who still is unemployed or under employed . . . tell that to the person trying to sell their home, realizing they owe more than what the house is worth. Rejoice always? Come on Paul. ***Get With It!***

And then there's John the Baptizer, in today's Gospel, who greets us with that wonderful one-liner "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!" Thanks a lot, John . . . And that's suppose to be Good News?"—"The Gospel of the Lord"—"Thanks be to God." I don't think so. That's not exactly the way we want a sermon to begin or the message we want to hear. John has a lot of "*chutzpah*" to call us to repent. So much for "rejoicing Sunday." So much for shouting for joy or joyfully singing. Come on, John, ***Get With It!***

And so . . . "What are we to do?" Interesting enough, that's the very same question the crowds ask John in today's Gospel reading: "What shall we do?" And I suspect that was the cry of God's ancient people to the Prophet Zechariah. And surely the early Church asked that question when Jesus didn't return like he said he would (or at least like what they thought they heard him say). And I suspect that is the question on the hearts of

most of us—I know it’s on my heart as I approach this Christmas season, and I suspect it’s on your lips too. What shall we do? Where shall we go? How are we to live out our lives in times like these?

Well . . . Listen carefully to what this Word of God is telling us on this Third Sunday of Advent. The prophet tells God’s ancient people (and us): God is with you . . . God, is in your midst . . . God will rejoice over you with gladness . . . God will renew you in love . . . God will exult over you with loud singing . . . God will remove disaster from you . . . God will bring you home. ***God Is With it! God Is With Us!***

And Paul, like the prophet, also reminds us that God is with us: “the peace of God,” he tells us, “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” And, trusting that promise, says Paul, “let your gentleness (kindness) be known to all people.” In other words, God’s peace doesn’t just drop down from heaven, but God’s peace comes to this world as you and I are involved in being kind and gentle to one another. God’s peace comes through the efforts we make to and for one another. ***God Is With it! God Is With Us!***

And then there’s John the Baptizer. Yes, he’s a character, and he knows it (and I suspect he was just a little bit proud of that, although in the end it will cost him his head). After John gets done calling us names and be-raiding us, we could well expect him to make some kind of radical demand of us, like, leave everything behind and join me in the desert; adopt a life of fasting and penance (eating locust and wild honey isn’t all that bad!). But John doesn’t do that. Instead, he calls us to fidelity in the very circumstances in which we find ourselves: To those who have more than they need, share with those who have less . . . tax collectors, be honest . . . soldiers, do not take advantage of the vulnerable . . . parents, cherish your children . . . spouses, be faithful . . . neighbors, live in peace. Indeed, ***God Is With it! God Is With Us!***

One cannot help but wonder how much of this world’s sorry state of affairs is not the consequence of our own fear and apathy. Well, it doesn’t have to be that way, and that’s precisely the message that God is bringing to our world and to us on this Third Sunday of Advent. It is precisely in and through our efforts to rid our world of such scourges, fears and apathy, that the new world is fashioned and the reign of God is brought forth. So . . . let’s ***Get With It! God Is With it! God Is With Us!*** Amen.

S.D.G.

Rev. Dr. David E. Abernethy-Deppe
Castro Valley, California