

I don't know about y'all, but if this is the good news, I sure don't want to hear the bad news. This sounds like a good old Jonathan-Edwards, fire-and-brimstone sermon, doesn't it? "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?" I have to laugh that, when this text was chosen for the Third Sunday in Advent, we were still using a pink candle on the Advent wreath to symbolize Joy. "Rejoice, you brood of vipers! The ax is lying at the root of the tree, just for you! Hooray!"

John's words today are harsh and threatening. I wonder if they make you uncomfortable. Maybe you're wishing that, instead of John's sermon, we could have read his father Zechariah's song for Joy Sunday: "And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way; to bring God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." Seems a lot more joyful.

I think it's relatively safe to say that this is another one of those dark Advent texts; dark in the sense that it is maybe hard to find the light of God in it. All the stuff John says is important and true; we know God's in there somewhere, but it's hard to tell just where. I've been talking this season about the importance of sitting in the dark, of allowing that discomfort to work on us, so I wonder if you'll join me in sitting in the darkness here for a moment.

Sitting here in the dark, maybe you're sitting there wondering how John's sermon fits with Paul's light and cheery encouragement to "Rejoice in the Lord always," and Zephaniah's hopeful exhortation to "Rejoice and exult with all your heart." As a matter of fact, John and Zephaniah would get on pretty well, I bet. We read today from the last half of the last chapter of Zephaniah's prophecy; the first two and a half chapters were all pretty consistent with John's message today. The book starts with "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea... I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the LORD," and it goes downhill from there, if you can believe it.

And yet, Zephaniah ends with this hopeful song we read today. How does that work? How do you get from "their blood will be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung" to "he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival"?

I have a hunch that maybe what's inconsistent about this message isn't the message itself, but those of us who are discomfited by hearing it. Our default when we read these challenging passages of scripture is to turn away from them. We will often try to explain them or rationalize them, saying things like, "that's not written for me" or "I'm not like that." When we can't do that, we ignore them, like we ignore the first two and a half chapters of Zephaniah. We can't face the darkness, so we turn to the light.

Advent, however, won't let us get away with that. Advent confronts us with these dark texts where God is hidden and won't let us turn away. So, since we're sitting in the darkness anyway, let's explore it. If this text makes you uncomfortable, why is that? Maybe you don't feel convicted by John's sermon, necessarily, but maybe it just doesn't really fit with your idea of who God is. Isn't God loving and forgiving? Axes and winnowing forks don't necessarily sound like "the tender compassion of our God." And John's focus on behavior is not exactly good Lutheran theology. Aren't we saved by grace and not works?

As I read this text, I have to admit to feeling threatened. I don't overcollect taxes, and I don't extort people with my power, but I do have two coats and plenty of food. (As a matter of fact, I have more than two coats. Don't tell anyone!) The text forces me to wonder if that axe is lying there for me. And I think that's exactly what John and Luke want me to think about. John says right out, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;'" in other words, don't think that you're safe because of covenant or grace or anything else. John wants us to be unsettled. He wants us to be afraid. Why?

Last week, I pointed out how hope can sometimes be used as a tool of privilege, and asked if the "shadow of hope," or the "death of hope" can actually sometimes transform us in a way that we become more open to what God is doing. Privilege, you see, isn't an inherently bad thing. Having privilege doesn't make a person bad or wrong. Where privilege gets us in trouble is when we uncritically defend our privilege at the expense of others.

And so, what I see John trying to do here is to make me aware of my privilege by knocking it out of my hands for a moment. When I stoop to pick it up, I have to look at it. You might even say that John is "shining a light" on my privilege. In his case, "privilege" is being a descendant of Abraham, but what is your privilege? What is your equivalent of having Abraham as an ancestor? Is it racial privilege? Is it the privilege that comes with social status or economic security? Does it come from having full use of your senses and limbs? Or from identifying as a Christian, or a

Lutheran? Privilege doesn't even have to be universally recognized to be powerful; it just has to be something that we think puts us in a better position than someone else.

I wonder if John isn't trying to rattle our cages to make us see the bars. Privilege can insulate us from the suffering of others, but it also means being insulated from those who suffer. In her book, Austin Channing Brown recounts multiple stories of White friends and coworkers who, despite their genuine love and good intentions, constantly and consistently remind her that she is not one of them. Whether it's touching her hair or making assumptions about her because of her race or telling her to have grace for ignorant, racist rants, the message is the same. It's completely unintentional, of course, and she realizes that; but that's the problem. How can they be aware of it when their privilege keeps them locked away from her pain?

The same is true in John's case: tax collectors use their privilege to benefit from their jobs, soldiers use their privilege to extort money, even average people use their privilege to keep themselves warm and fed while others cannot. Privilege protects us, but it also imprisons us.

And that makes Paul's choice of words interesting to me: "the peace of god, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." That word, "guard," just like the Greek word it translates, can mean to keep safe and protect, but it can also mean to hold prisoner. A "guard" can be either a jailor or a bodyguard; I can't help but wonder if, in this context, it is both.

What would happen if we could let go of that privilege guarding our hearts and minds? Maybe we would no longer be able to rest in the comfort of believing that God would make everything right in the end, somehow, in spite of us, but maybe we would find a living, breathing, bleeding hope as the peace of God takes us captive to a new way of being, a way in which there is no privilege that keeps us separate from one another, but in which God abides in us and we abide in one another.

Maybe that could be a place where God is in this dark text. That's where I see Them, anyway. After sitting in the dark with Paul and John and Luke and Zephaniah, I think I hear God inviting me to give up my privilege before God takes it away. Is that what you hear? Or is this text saying something different to you? That's what's tricky about sitting in the dark; it's hard to know exactly where God is.

What we do know, however, is that God is in the dark with us, and that is a cause for joy, even on "Brood of Vipers" Sunday. I wonder if that might be what allows us to "rejoice in the

Lord always,” even when there seems to be very little to rejoice in. Even the darkness can be cause for a song, even a warning can be occasion for a shout of joy, because even in the threat of judgement, there is the promise of justice.

What I hear in this text is nothing short of God’s unconditional love. It’s the dark side of that love, to be sure, but it’s love, all the same. Think about it: if God loves the people being extorted by the soldiers as much as the soldiers themselves, if God loves those swindled by the tax collectors and those going cold and hungry as much as the people who deny them what they need, doesn’t it make sense for God to want things to change? Doesn’t it make sense that God would be angry about what we sometimes do to one another—or to ourselves?

Maybe you hear the threat of punishment in this text, but I don’t. Punishment is a human thing. God’s sense justice is restorative, not retributive. Remember how Luke introduced John last week, quoting from Isaiah: the valleys will be filled and the hills and mountains made low. That’s what I hear John proclaiming here: the lofty are brought down, and the lowly are filled up. That sounds like a recipe for peace, to me, even if it is peace that’s a little beyond my understanding.

But that’s okay: I don’t feel the need to understand it. After sitting in the darkness a while and paying attention to what comes up as I wrestle with these questions, I can tell that it’s doing something to me. I appreciate the questions. I may not be sure of the answers, but I am sure that God is working on me somehow in this darkness, in this discomfort. And for that, I think I will rejoice.