

3rd Sunday of Advent – Year C

December 15, 2024

By The Rev Ian M Delinger

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

*O King of the Nations, and our great Desire, You Cornerstone who makes one of many:
as You have formed us from the ground, come now and save us.*

December! The time of year when we are constantly being reminded that we are being watched closely to determine whether or not we are worthy of Christmas presents:

*You better watch out. You better not cry.
You better not shout, I'm telling you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.*

I'm not sure how many of you think it's creepy, but the happy-go-lucky music does little to hide from the Mandated Reporter in me the disturbing assertion that:

*He sees you when you're sleeping.
He knows when you're awake.
He knows when you've been bad or good,
So be good for goodness' sake!*

It is no joke that, if Santa were a member of this congregation, and this sort of behavior was relayed to me, I would have to report Santa to Child Protective Services.

I don't have kids, and the last in the next generation of my family just turned an adult 2 weeks ago, so my next statement may be wildly off. But I don't think kids anymore really care if Santa is watching them. They *expect* to receive gifts, regardless of their behavior. We've been talking for a couple of decades now about how entitled the younger generations are. Even at the beginning of this year's most popular Hollywood Christmas movie *Red One*, The Rock says that

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that there are more on the naughty list than the nice list, and they still expect presents from Santa. I think it's the parents and grandparents who will get coal in their stockings if they dare suggest that a child isn't worthy of presents this year.

And it's *that* entitlement and individualism that John the Baptizer warns against today:

Tax collectors came and asked, "What should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked, and he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

These were people who were in search of, and wanted to follow the Messiah. They had heard about Jesus, and they had heard about John. And John was very clear that they needed to "*bear fruits worthy of repentance*". These were people in professions who would have expected to know the Messiah yet not have to amend their lives. So, *before* they ask John what they are to do, he gets in front of that entitlement and says:

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'.

We're seeing a lot of that in the news, and will probably see a lot more of that: the hypocrisy of church leaders who preach one thing but behave differently. But I don't want to talk about them; I want to talk about *us*. I want us to explore the entitlement and individualism that we have that this period of Advent is for.

In a book of reflections, *A Journey with Luke*, The Rt Rev J Neil Alexander reflects on today's scripture and then asks the question:

From what do you need to be unbound so that your expectation and anticipation of what God wants to do in your life can soar?

We often focus on the painful elements of our lives that we want to lift up to God. And we believe that God understands our challenges. That was what The Incarnation was about: *Surely He has borne our griefs*. Isaiah 53.4 became a reality at The Crucifixion. But it's not always our challenges that prevent what God wants to do in our lives from happening. It's more often our blind spots, our entitlement and individualism that we cannot see in ourselves or refuse to acknowledge.

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What individualism or entitlement do you need to be released from so that what God wants to do in your life can flourish?

Individualism is actually a theological concept that is discussed within Christian ethics. Many value the concept of personal responsibility. And we talk of a personal repentance and faith. Martin Luther's concept of the priesthood of all believers, while empowering for the laity, has been morphed into an individualized practice of faith, rather than faith as a community in which the organic community nurtures one another in faith. And as I emphasized at Henry's Baptism, we often live out our faith to either get into Heaven or avoid Hell, which are also very individualistic expressions of faith.

Entitlement in contemporary culture is usually applied to the younger generations or the super wealthy. And certainly in a small community like a parish church, money does equal influence for some. But we all have some sense of entitlement; we probably just never reflect on it.

Psychology Today offers 9 aspects of entitlement:

- *Not all rules apply to you.*
- *Small favors are for others to do, not for you to do.*
- *Your agenda and interests are to be of more interest than others'.*
- *Rules that are intended to ensure everyone's comfort aren't meant for you.*
- *Freeloading is OK for you to do.*
- *Inconveniencing others without thinking is common.*
- *It's okay to upset or offend other people.*
- *Reciprocity is not in your vocabulary.*
- *In work groups, you're the de facto leader.*

Let me put it more simply. A large part of thinking within what is extolled as the Protestant Work Ethic is: *I worked hard, therefore I deserve more.* That part of the Protestant Work Ethic has never been part of the Christian faith as demonstrated by the mission and ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, and John the Baptizer is telling us to rid ourselves of that way of thinking as we await Christ's Coming.

John the Baptizer reminds the tax collectors and soldiers that they, too, must live a life of repentance in order to hang out with the Messiah. Their individualism and entitlement are indeed included in the call to repent and be baptized. They will be joining a community of followers where *all* the rules apply to *all* persons, and the community of believers is to build up their common life.

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John's forecasting of Jesus is a stern warning that Jesus takes His words and actions seriously. John's message to those who gathered around him is the same message for us today: *No freeloaders here!* We are *all* under the same ethical obligations in our shared life in Christ. It was in this way that John was sharing the Good News:

With many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Of course, that Good News was and is Jesus Christ. To live fully in Christ, we must explore within ourselves that question Bishop Alexander draws from today's Gospel:

From what do you need to be unbound so that your expectation and anticipation of what God wants to do in your life can soar?

What individualism or entitlement do you need to be released from so that what God wants to do in your life can flourish?

Intrinsic in John the Baptizer's story and in his message is the hope and expectation of Jesus the Christ: *There is more to come!* A new age is breaking through and Jesus will bring a new world. *But* it will not come without sacrifice, and not everyone will be able to live up to the moment:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.

John is telling us to get ready. That is what we have set aside the time of Advent for: to get ready, to examine your life, to contemplate what "*to bear fruit*" means for you. It's a season of anticipation but also one of self-reflection and preparation for the challenges of being a follower of Jesus. Are you capable of sharing what you have, being faithful and honest and doing the right things to the extent Jesus want? Because it's not just about a baby in a cattle stall – which is another phone call to Child Protective Services.

The Coming of Jesus has very little to do with our over-romanticized manger scene. Jesus in the Gospels and the Jesus of our faith today came and turned everything upside down. In the Gospels – and we believe that when He comes again – Jesus demanded a different kind of world, unconcerned with any individual's need for self-promotion or self-preservation, but a world focused on God and what God desires to do among us.

So, we ask ourselves:

From what do you need to be unbound so that your expectation and anticipation of what God wants to do in your life can soar?

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What individualism or entitlement do you need to be released from so that what God wants to do in your life can flourish?

In the #1 Christmas movie of right now, *Red One*, Santa's bodyguard says:

For the first time ever, more people are on the naughty list than not ... And it's like they don't even care.

Santa replies:

If nothing matters to them, it seems to me they need us now more than ever ... It's not our job to change people. People change themselves. We just show them that we believe in them.

We don't need a blockbuster Hollywood movie to tell us that, because that's what John the Baptizer is telling us today. That reflection to unbind ourselves, to release ourselves from individualism and entitlement does not have to be self-loathing, hair-shirt-wearing, or therapy sessions. It's not *'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town'*. It's not a one-and-done party event with presents and candy. Living into who Christ is calling you to be – with this exhortation from John the Baptizer and many others – *can* be filled with the joy of releasing yourself from that which separates you from others and from God, what separates you from yourself, even. You can find your way into being in a *community* of believers and know the joy of sharing in the lives of others. You can turn your entitlement quirk into experiencing the joys of being in community.

We know something amazing is coming, something exciting. It's more than the nostalgia of the Nativity Scene in the 2nd chapter of Luke's Gospel. But this amazing and exciting thing is coming, and we don't know exactly what it will be or when or where. This advent of our lives – not just of Christmas – should pique our interest and draw us in to looking forward with intense energy. As we do that self-reflection and work through our individualism and entitlement, we will begin to see more clearly the 'what' the 'when' and the 'where' of Christ's Coming.

If there is any notion that fear of Santa's threats are why we care for people, then we have fallen into the trap of individualism, and individualism leads to entitlement. One of the storylines in *Red One* is that Santa's bodyguard wants to retire. The person to replace him is a contract con. The character played by Chris Evans must release himself from his individualism and entitlement so that he can be in community with Santa and his world. The Rock says to his eventual replacement:

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*You don't just happen to be on the naughty list, Jack. You put yourself there ...
You decide to only look after yourself, over everyone else on this earth.*

Red One is a John the Baptizer movie.

We are called by God to be in community and to care for one another and for Creation not because any risk-or-reward system. We are called into community because we are all one, and when we are unbound and released, when one suffers, all suffer; when one rejoices, all rejoice!

So, we ask ourselves:

From what do you need to be unbound so that your expectation and anticipation of what God wants to do in your life can soar?

What individualism or entitlement do you need to be released from so that what God wants to do in your life can flourish?

And when you are unbound and released from whatever it is, you can be freed to:

Let your gentleness be known to everyone, for the Lord is near.