

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
13 December 2009**

*3 Advent: Cant 9; Zeph 3:14–20;  
Phil 4:4–7; Lk 3:7–18*

*Thomas Eoyang*

On the one hand Zephaniah, whose name means “God has protected,” tells us to sing aloud and rejoice because God will save us from disaster. Rejoicing, gladness, and love are promised to us by the God who protects us. On the other hand, John the Baptist calls us “you brood of vipers.”

On the one hand we hear Paul tell the church in Philippi, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Paul calls on the church to pray with thanksgiving, confident in the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. On the other hand John the Baptist warns us that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. John prophesies that someone more powerful than he will come with a winnowing fork to separate the chaff from the grain, and will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. And Luke calls this proclamation about the coming fiery judgment good news. Is it really good news to learn that we will be judged and maybe punished? Happy or fearful? Joyous or frightened? How do we respond to today’s conflicting messages?

I’m guessing that most of us take to one message better than the other. We don’t like being yelled at, we don’t like being called names, we don’t like being made to think poorly of ourselves. We prefer to hear about God’s love and compassion rather than God’s punishing judgment. If judgment is meant to scare us into being good and doing good, most of us prefer the kinder, gentler approach that encourages us and gives us heart.

There’s a lot to be said for the kinder gentler approach. In a recent “Story Corps” segment on public radio a mother interviewed her ten-year-old son and got him to talk about how he not only protects his little sister, who is deaf, from the inevitable and brutal teasing she gets at school, but how he lovingly encourages her by telling her it was neat that she got to learn sign language. He gave her the confidence as well as the protection of an older brother. The mother told him of a visit to the department store Santa that the little boy no longer remembered. He had asked Santa to give his little sister her hearing, and he told Santa that he was going to grow up to be an ear-nose-and-throat doctor so that one day he would cure deafness. The Santa told the mother to give the little boy whatever he wanted for Christmas, because this was the best wish he’d heard all week.

Someone once said that what we learn from people like this little boy is that if the kingdom of God comes, it will not arrive by God overriding the worst that people can do to one another. The kingdom will come through God using the best of who we are and what we do for each other.

This is certainly my preferred understanding of God’s good news as well. Rather than have my faults pointed out and be told about everything I’ve done wrong, and rather than point out your shortcomings to you, and rather than worry about God’s punishment of us all, I much prefer that we focus on the positive, identify and encourage the good that is in all of us, and let the bad stuff go unaddressed, unnoticed.

Well, but—(you were expecting a “but” here weren’t you?)—there are times in my life when I know the kinder and gentler approach doesn’t quite do the trick. There are times when I’m acutely aware of my tendency to sit back and be complacent. There are times when I rely on my official membership in the Benevolent and Illustrious Order of Episcopal Christians to be proof of my virtue, of my peachy-keen relationship with God, of my truthfulness, my sense of honor and justice, my all-around excellence.

The temptation to think only well of ourselves, and the pain of having to confront and live with our many imperfections can lead us to avoid the unpleasant truth that we are fallible, sinful beings. And with that avoidance can come a progressive moral and spiritual blindness. With that failure to look within and see where we are broken, sinful, and in need of healing comes a progressive inability to see what is truly going on in the interactions between us and the people around us, including those we love and cherish; we cease to look clearly and honestly at what is going on between us and the rest of the world.

We Americans can be particularly prone to moral and spiritual blindness. Many argue for what’s called “American exceptionalism,” the idea that from our birth as a nation we have been better, more moral, more just, more free, more generous than other nations. As a people we are all those things, some say, simply by virtue of being American. Some of us like to see ourselves as the new people of God, chosen by God.

But group status, whether as Episcopal Christians or as Americans, does not confer moral and spiritual excellence. That’s what John the Baptist is saying, in his typically blunt way. He tells the people who’ve come to him not to feel so smug and self-satisfied simply because they are descended from Abraham. Rather they must actually lead ethical lives, sharing their goods with those in need. Tax collectors shouldn’t gouge the people. Soldiers shouldn’t extort money from the people they’re supposed to protect.

We Americans could stand to look within from time to time, to examine our hearts from time to time, to evaluate the ethics of our behavior, to identify our sins and repent. We could stand to let go of our smugness, of the self-justifying myths that we fail to challenge—like the one where we are always the good guys in the drama of world events, where we are always the white knights who support the little guy, the helpless and the oppressed. There are the myths that we always promote freedom and tolerance, that we are always humane and never brutal, always just and never biased—even though our prisoners are tortured in far away lands, even though we consistently favor the wealthy over the poor, even though we let our economy come crashing down most heavily on the people at the bottom.

Ask the descendants of the people who lived here before white Europeans came whether these self-justifying American images are true. Ask the people of Latin America or the people in a whole lot of nations in Africa. Ask gay and lesbian couples and families who continue to be denied equal rights. Ask the families of recent immigrants legal and illegal. And ask American people of African descent.

It’s hard to think that we should seek to repent of our corporate as well as our personal wrong-doing. It’s hard on our need to feel self-justified, on our need to love ourselves and be loved by others; it’s hard on our spiritual preference for the kind and gentle, the easy and convenient.

But in our quest for God, for God's kingdom, I think we have to do both: we have to encourage the best that we are capable of, AND we have to look honestly at the worst that we do to one another. We are thankful for the times when by God's grace we act out of our best selves, and yet we also need the humility and honesty to recognize what we do out of our worst selves, the evil we do and the evil done on our behalf.

There's a section in our prayer book that we don't use very much called "The Reconciliation of a Penitent." It is our Episcopal version of the Roman Catholic sacrament of confession, and it was brought up recently at one of my diocesan committee meetings. Though I remember leading a discussion of it in seminary, it's frankly not a part of the prayer book that I have ever used. But in this season, I think I'd like to explore this ritual a little more; I'm feeling the need to pray with it and to go through it with another priest for the first time and perhaps even on a regular basis. I feel in a way that I can't explain that the Holy Spirit is calling me to take another step in my spiritual journey.

Whatever may be going on inside that makes me want to look at this ritual more seriously, I am confident that in spite of our constant need for repentance, we can take heart, we can rejoice, because God is near. We can be confident in the face of all that challenges us, because though God judges, he judges with compassion and mercy. We can sing aloud, because the God of love, the God who protects us, the God whose peace surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.