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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
12th December 2009
Advent 3
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

Song of Isaiah

Philippians 4:4-9

Gaudete in Domino semper iterum dico gaudete!

Rejoice in the Lord always! And again, I say rejoice!

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

Γεννηματα ε'χιδνων!

You brood of vipers!

What in the *heck* is going on today?!? It's Gaudete Sunday, a Sunday to rejoice! And here's this weirdo coming down out of the hills calling us children of *snakes*! I thought Christmas was all about being happy! Rejoicing! Glory to God in the highest, and all that! Children of *vipers*?!?

Well, really, I'm not sure that's very tasteful, or proper...

Relax.

God is coming home.

Home. In the reading from Zephaniah, God is coming home, and he is bringing us there. "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise...At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you. The Lord, your God, is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love."

It's certainly odd these days to think of Jerusalem as home. Home for whom? For Zionist Israelis? For Christian Palestinians? For Muslims? No. Jerusalem, God's Jerusalem, is the home where God lives. *Our* Jerusalem is here, for God is present, and God is searching for a home. And John the Baptist is telling us to prepare it, to prepare our home for the coming God.

Right now, it's about two weeks until the birth. Mary is heavily pregnant, Joseph is wondering how they're going to get to Bethlehem to be counted in the coming census. The child has stirred in the womb, and we are preparing for him a home.

Those of you who are parents...think back to those early days of expectation. People said, "Congratulations!" and a few people said, "Oh, my, prepare yourselves: your lives are going to change. Get ready." Now they probably didn't call you children of vipers, but the message was clear: the coming one demands changes, changes of all of us. No more late night parties, less sleep, smelly diapers and nasty smashed up food spit out on the tablecloth. And the cost. There's Pampers, and little jammies that seem too small about every third day. (Wait till they start wearing *shoes!*) Toys. Snuggly stuffed bears. Maybe a new alarm system. And then if you really want to get depressed, you can look down the road seventeen or eighteen years and think about how you're going to pay for college.

And there's the emotional change, the spiritual change. This infant...growing in the mother's womb...is *alive*. It's going to expect something of you — love, tenderness, attention. And you're going to give, hopefully, love, tenderness, attention — and discipline and instruction and the facts of life and oh, Lord, am I up to this? A friend of mine says he prefers the "lend-lease" method of parenthood: teach Sunday School or lead a youth group, and then send 'em on back. And for those of us who have not been parents, that's not a bad idea.

But for the parents among us...think back to two weeks before the birth. Any anxiety? Any fear? Any...sense of wonder?

Rejoice! The birth is coming! The Lord is near! YIKES! Get ready!

There were among John's listeners some who seemed to say, "I don't need this — I am a child of Abraham!" Much as we might be tempted "I'm spiritually fit — I'm an Episcopalian!"

But John warns us in no uncertain terms that that's not enough. John is warning us that we need to create a new home, for Love is coming, Love is near. We need to prepare the way. We need to repent. We need to turn our lives upside down, rich people giving to the poor, powerful men giving out justice, tax collectors being fair (tell *that* the next time you're up for an IRS audit!). John the Baptist is telling us that just because we're children of Abraham, or Pentecostals, or Roman Catholics, or Episcopalians — don't rest on your laurels, because people like us are a dime a dozen in God's eyes.

We must change. We need to listen to the voice crying in the wilderness, because he speaks the truth of God. Now sometimes weird people claim to speak for God, but if we test what they say with the test of love, well, if love is missing, it's not God's truth. And John, the way he tells the rich person to give away a coat to

a poor person, well, he's expressing the love of God for the outcast, the poor, the have-nots. That's the message of God's love, and that's the truth.

Home. We need to prepare a home of love.

We all have different images of home. For me, these days, it's a rather a mess, but it's a wonderful image. My bookshelves could be better organized, there's stray bits of wool all over the place, Christmas decoration boxes appear in the oddest places, and the kitchen floor needs a good scrub. I'll admit: our house is a bit chaotic, but it's home.

Some of us have memories of childhood Christmas at home. The tingling scent of pine, the pungent spice of an orange ball and cinnamon. A fireplace. Warmth. Tenderness. Some of us have images that aren't quite so picture perfect — anger or mistrust or poverty or fear. The greeting card image of home isn't always real life. Christmas seems to bring out the "fun" in dysfunctional. It's not always Norman Rockwellian, even in the best of families.

And so we all have the chance to create a new image of home, preparing the way of the Lord who had no home, preparing the way for God's home. A home where people aren't hungry, where there's no war, where all humankind lives in the wonder of God and for the delight of God.

Fact: There are more than 33 million people living in poverty in the United States this Christmas.¹

Fact: More than 11 million of them are children.

Fact: More than half the world's population tries to survive on less than \$2 per day. One fifth of the world's people face starvation as they subsist on less than \$1 per day.

Fact: Today there will be death by terrorism, war, or oppression in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Central America, Nigeria, Palestine, and the Sudan and probably a whole lot more places I haven't named. Possibly right here in America.

Is this the kind of home we're preparing for God? Is this the greeting card image of our lives? or is it more likely the reality of an enormous part of humanity? Rejoice in the Lord always?

¹ Source: Sojourners Bulletin for Advent. Sojourners, Washington, D.C.

OK. Christmas is approaching, and I'm supposed to get into the spirit. And I think I am.

I'm counting my blessings, which are too numerous to mention here – but trust me, they are genuine, they are true, and I am deeply grateful.

But I'm also reflecting on the state of the world, and John's admonition that we change our ways, the underlying message of the readings today that God is searching, yearning, for a home. And behind it all is the image of Mary, awkward and ponderous with child who will have no home. She has answered God with a generous "YES." She, Mary, will provide a home – or at least a womb – for God's Son, the Child of all humankind, the One who will preach peace and justice and will repeat John's message of repentance, the Son who will, ultimately, die at the hands of oppression and power-mad zealots.

The same Son who teaches us that the powerless need to be reminded that God loves them, and that the powerful need to be encouraged to abandon their own comfort for the sake of others. The good news of Jesus Christ is the good news of the prophet: to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. And it is all done in the name of a wild, reckless, no-holds-barred love...the love of God.

And so I ask you. What kind of home are you creating for God? How can we decorate this home, this island home, with a little more generosity and a little more justice? How can we speak out in love against those who wield power ruthlessly? How can we show that religious, cultural, and political fanatics have no place in God's home?

Our house is a mess, my friends, but I live in hope and I believe we can create a home for God. That's the message of the prophets. That we'll try and try again, never giving up.

Because God never gives up on us.

That's why Jesus is coming.

Amen.