

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

50 Bedford Road

Armonk, New York 10504

The Third Sunday of Advent:

Advent 3 (C)

December 12, 2021

DRAFT

Christ is on his way

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

John the baptizer said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have

Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money

from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Refine us, O Lord, that we would be powerful instruments of your love for others. Amen.

“A local United Way office realized that it had never received a donation from the town’s most successful miser. So the person in charge of contributions called on him to persuade him to contribute. He said to the miser, “Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least half a million dollars you give nothing to charity. Wouldn’t you like to give back to the community in some way? The miser mulled this over for a moment and replied, “First, did

your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness and has medical bills that are several times her annual income? Embarrassed, the United Way representative mumbled, “Um...,no.” The miser continued, “Or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?” The stricken United Way rep began to stammer out an apology but was interrupted. “Or that my sister’s husband died in a traffic accident,” the miser’s voice rising in indignation, “leaving her penniless with three children?!” The humiliated United Way rep, completely beaten, said simply, “I had no idea....” On a roll, the miser cut him off again, “So if I don’t give any money to them,

why should I give any to you?” [Thanks to Pastor David Mosser, Graham, Texas, in “Sermon Mall”.]

When a survey of American feelings was taken in the Year 1999, about a year before 9-11-2001, it was found that 64 percent believed there would be a terrorist attack on the United States in the next century; 63 percent believed there would be a major energy crisis; 56 percent believe there would be an epidemic worse than AIDS; 37 percent, three out of eight, believed that the United States would become involved in a nuclear war; and 31 percent believe that a huge asteroid would strike the Earth. So in the

midst of this rampant paranoia, it behooves us Christians to show forth our confidence that the Lord will not allow heaven and earth to pass away until he comes again with power and great glory. Our troubles will only last for a time, and then the glory of the Lord will appear coming in the clouds.

I don't know if you like I tried checking off the events yet to come, as expected by many in 1999, the top three have already occurred—the 2001 terrorist attack, the prevailing energy and climate change crisis; and, in 2020, covid, an epidemic worse than AIDS, only two of that list have yet to happen: 37 percent, three out of eight, believed that the United States will

become involved in a nuclear war; and 31 percent believe that a huge asteroid will strike the Earth.

Indeed there is a multination watch on huge asteroids coming near Earth's orbit, and watch the news about Iran and North Korea, and the nuclear question is high on many lists as we speak today.

John the Baptist's message in our Gospel lesson for today would agree with the theology printed on a young man's T-shirt several years ago. The front read "Jesus is coming soon..." And the back side said "And, boy, is he ticked!"

In this season of Advent we need to be thinking of how we ourselves can find ways of turning our own lives around. A survey of the US population by the National Opinion Center found that worshippers do one good deed only every 2.8 days on average. The average American however does one good deed every 3.3 days, about 15 percent less. And the average non-worshipper does a good deed every 3.8 days, about 25 percent less than the average worshipper. So worshipping God has a measurable difference, but of course we hope that would be the case!

Now is the time to get right with God and our neighbor. Let us not harbor ill will. Let us

not hold grudges. Let us find the joy of Christ that lives within each person who calls Christ Jesus their Lord. Where there is joy, there is God indeed. We are blessed. Let us bless others. And let us thank the Lord for all the benefits God has given us through the death, resurrection, and ascension of his one and only Son, our Savior, our Redeemer, our King.

You possibly noted that the new candle that is lit in our Advent wreath today is the pink one. Does anyone know why we light a pink one on this Sunday? It is to show the lightening or lifting of the penitential season of Advent in recognition of the numerous appearances of the

word, “rejoice” in our readings for today.

Historically on this Sunday there was an Introit hymn sung called “Gaudete”, [gow-DAY-tay], the Latin word for “rejoice”, because the first word in the Latin version of that hymn is “rejoice.” The hymn was a musical setting for the Epistle lesson for today, as you can read in our bulletins, the Philippians reading, that says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” Why on earth would Paul, the writer of the Epistle to the Philippians, want his congregations to “rejoice”? It was surely because he did not want his Christian followers to go around with dreary eyes and bowed heads, for indeed their Messiah had come and will

come again and would save them from the wrath to come in the Last Days. They had nothing to fear but fear itself, to paraphrase the British Prime Minister during World War II, Winston Churchill. If we as followers of Christ are fearful of the future, then imagine how others who have no assurance of an eternal life with God must feel. We are the people of hope, of assurance of things to come, so we have to model for others our confidence in Jesus our Savior. Rejoice! in the knowledge that our future has been secured by the shedding of Christ's blood for us on the cross. Rejoice that our sins have been forgiven. Rejoice that our

names are written permanently in heaven.

Rejoice, I say!

Arturo Toscanini, the famous conductor, got his big break when the conductor of the orchestra in which he was playing was sidelined due to illness. Arturo was extremely near-sighted and unable to read the music while standing on the conductor's podium, but he had committed the entire movement to memory.

And when he was called on to lead that orchestra, he was able to conduct both from his memory and from his heart, and the performance was the best ever heard. Arturo Toscanini's name was immediately made famous. He could feel the meaning of the music

in his heart as well as in his mind, and he led the other musicians to be of like mind and heart [from “LectioAid”].

We too need to feel the joy of our faith in our hearts and in our minds and to show forth the joy in our hearts to others. We are to be the lights that lighten the darkness of others.

Someone has counted that there are 365 “fear not's” in the Bible, one for each day of the year.

Reverend Patricia Vanderpol told a very personal story. In the early 1990’s when she was pastoring First Presbyterian Church in Vandalia, Missouri, about an hour and a half from St. Louis, she made the requisite trip to the

area mall in St. Louis to finish her Christmas shopping. She says she felt she was really on top of things and organized to the hilt. Patricia was armed with her credit card, detailed lists, and a full tank of gas (low emissions vehicles were well in the future then!). She ate lunch in a Chinese restaurant at the mall, and went over her shopping list. She felt fabulous, on top of the world: she was nearly finished, everything was under control, she could see the accomplishment of her tasks soon ahead. After lunch she got the last things on her list and felt the weight of the world lift from her shoulders-- we hopefully also will know that feeling by the end of Advent, God willing. Snowflakes were

just starting to chase around, and on the way back driving back home she said she was singing Christmas carols at the top of her lungs--pure joy. Then she stopped at a big variety store in Troy, Missouri, on her way home. She went in to do her usual shopping--lightbulbs, toothpaste, scotch tape, those sorts of things. Then Patricia Vanderpol writes: "As I entered the [store], I saw three scruffy kids, apparently on their own. The oldest girl was perhaps nine, the middle one, a boy, of maybe five, and probably a three year old. They were coatless, none too tidy, and looked cold. I went on my way, tossing items in my basket, near a back corner of the store, when I saw the children

again. They were counting out their money on a box. Lots of coins. I smiled to myself, [she writes,] and went on my way.... Finally my list was finished. Now I was really finished, and I was flying high. At the check stand, the line was long, and I found myself behind the three kids. They had found a short-sleeved t-shirt top—probably a Christmas present for their mom, obviously taken from the last summer clearance sale rack. Finally it was their turn at the check stand, and they placed the [t-shirt] top on the moving belt [of the clerk]. The clerk scanned the item, never made eye contact with the children, and stated the purchase price. The oldest girl dumped all their money on the

counter, and the clerk began counting it. Only a couple of crumpled dollar bills, the rest coins, mostly small ones. Nearing the end of the coins, still never looking at the children, she called her supervisor over. The clerk said, 'How do I void this sale?' They're short.' [Patricia Vanderpol writes,] I could feel the embarrassment and fear of the little girl. No present for mom, what would the clerk do to them--humiliation. I asked the clerk how much she needed, and was much less than a dollar. Obviously the children hadn't figured the sales tax. [Patricia continued,] I was furious with the clerk for her rudeness. Where was her Christmas spirit, anyway. I handed the clerk a

dollar bill, and she made the change, handing it to the girl. The little girl tried to give it to me, and I told her to keep the change and have a merry Christmas. I was so angry with the clerk. All the way home, Christmas carols were the last thing on my mind [Patricia writes]. I kept thinking I should have talked to the manager of the store. I should have reported that terrible clerk. My Christmas mood was utterly ruined. That night at supper [Patricia] recounted the whole fiasco to [her] husband and kids. [She continues,] “that night tossing in bed, going over my 3 Advent John the Baptist sermon, it hit me like a ton of bricks. All of my self-righteousness, all of my control over my own

ability to get myself ready for Christmas, flew away like powder snowflakes in a gale.

[Patricia said to herself,] no way do I get my list complete and say, ‘OK, I’m ready; let’s celebrate.’ Before God, I’m always a dollar short. I am those three scruffy children. And that poor, tired clerk. What right did I have to judge her? God have mercy.”

If we are having trouble adjusting to the coming of Christmas, or to the second coming of Christ, maybe there is something we need to tidy up in our own lives. Maybe our expectations of others was just a little bit too high. Maybe the expectations we have for ourselves are a touch too exaggerated, and that

may cause us to be short tempered with someone else who is completely innocent of our own troubles. Advent is the time we have to take an assessment of where our lives really are with respect to God. Have we judged others when we should not have judged? Have we been as honest as we should have been? Have we used our position, our money, our influence in wrong ways? Where have we come up short on what God would have us do?

Peter Marshall, a noted pastor of the middle of the twentieth century and chaplain to the US Senate, saw Christianity starting, starting, as

good news, but then he said we have allowed it to become diluted into merely good advice.

John the Baptist is trying to get the people's heart ready to receive the coming Messiah. Christ is on the way. John's message to them as it is to us today is, "Be ready, get our hearts ready, the Lord is near. Come let us adore him.

Amen

Description: The coming of Christ in the first century was announced by John the Baptist.

Now in the twenty-first century, we again hear the same words of John, and his advice to get our lives and hearts prepared for Christ's coming again, not as a baby, but as the King of the Universe, Lord of lords, and King of Kings. Are we ready? Christ is on his way.

Tags: John, Baptist, Lord, Christ, coming, Advent, scruffy, children, clerk, United Way, asteroid, nuclear, rejoice, Toscanini, fear not, assurance, eternal, life