

Third Sunday in Advent
December 11, 1988

Texts:

Zephaniah 3:14-18a
Psalm: Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7(7-9)
Luke 3:7-18

Alone from God comes life!
Soli Deo Gloria and Soli Deo veno vida!
We shall not die but live
and declare the great things
that God has done! (Psalm 118.v.17)

"Genuine faith can grow only where man has completely ceased to trust in men and hanker after earthly powers and temporal means of power, only where every human support has broken down and trust in God has become a living force."
from A. Weiser The Psalms, page 726.

(Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962)

In the heavy themes, often very thick with the second coming and judgment day, the church has taken the Third Advent aside and made it a day for rejoicing. That's why it's a pink candle that we light today. And you see the note of rejoicing: Zephaniah declares that God will rejoice over you, in gladness, the Lord will renew you in love - the Lord will exult over you with loud singing as in the day of a festival.

Isaiah proclaims: with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation - shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion - for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

St. Paul in Philippians says: Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice! What a confidence St. Paul has in the Lord - so that he teaches us to have our requests made known, and God will provide for us, and God will be with us even in the end of all days - and therefore even in Advent we need not worry.

When we get to the prophet, we look in vain for rejoicing. I mean the last prophet, John, the Baptizer. He laces into the people and confronts them with their sin. You brood of vipers! You family of poisonous snakes! What a thing to call the chosen people! But we rejoice that a true prophet arose, who like a wall would stand before the whole people - and would not become corrupted by them, but stood before them so that the only choice they would have was to purify themselves and change their way of life.

Now that is cause for rejoicing. That is good news. As difficult as John's judgment is to hear, it represents a chance for the people to change their ways. It represents an opportunity for the people to get up into real life, the abundant life - which does not mean accumulating possessions, but sharing

possessions. Even the tax-collectors - they are supposed to stay at the rate, and not to raise it in their personal greed. And the soldiers are to be content with their wages and stop extorting money and goods from the people of Palestine, then in Roman occupation.

What rejoicing comes about in heaven when one sinner repents and changes his/her ways. And the crowds came down from the hills of Jerusalem and came to the banks of the river Jordan to be baptized by John. In the Gospel of Mark it says: " and there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan confessing their sins."(Mark.1.v.5) What a cause for rejoicing!

Here is one who went into the desert - the place of loneliness, of difficulty, of an exhausting life just to stay in existence, in a place life comes to an end - and found the real source of life there, found the real words there that would make all the words of the people become new again. What a cause for rejoicing!

And when you understand what this second Elijah, John the Baptist, is accomplishing in the Word of God, then you see there is as much rejoicing in the Gospel as there is in the Epistle, and the other two readings from Isaiah and Zephaniah.

Don't you remember what the landscape around our church looked like several years ago? Now a building is going up across the street. The whole area over there was barren for 25 years. Beside us here only a few years ago, there was no McDonalds. And all the buildings around our church stood empty: the Bonomo Candy Factory, the Brighton Laundry. (When they started renovating the latter building, which sits on almost a whole block, tens of thousands of rats swarmed over our church. You could look out the window and see them swarming through the bushes. They ran over the window sills.) Look, we were in a desert. And we too are a voice crying in the wilderness. And people can't come to us and be with us without becoming challenged by the need to repent. And that is cause for rejoicing! The suffering that we endure here at St. Paul's Lutheran Church - where so many leave, making it all so much more difficult for us, is God's way of preparing us so that the Word of God can come to this place...so that the Word of God can be preached and proclaimed here, so that the sacraments can be administered here.

You and I know there are false prophets, phoney Christians, and useless churches. Thank God that our church somehow ended up in a desert, in a wilderness - and with God able to bring us down very low, God prepared us so that the Word of God could really be proclaimed here, and the sacraments could duly be administered and we can genuinely fulfill the definition of what it means to be a church - because a remnant has remained faithful, and God can restore the people with the remnant.

What a cause for rejoicing! Can't you see the marvellous thing God has done with us? What God has done and is doing is digging a deep well here in the hearts and minds and lives of the remnant - and out of this well people from all over will be able to come to draw out the living water of salvation.

All around people will hear that the Word of God has come - and they will come and draw water out of this well of salvation, and they will quench the thirst of their souls and they will be about their way rejoicing. But it won't be their way any longer - it will be God's way - and with the Holy Water in hand they will sing: "On our Way Rejoicing!"

Can't you see the Lord rejoicing over us? That looks to me like God not being able to contain himself for joy, and running around us, jumping up and down, shouting for joy - and saying: "It's so great you have come alive! What a day! What a breakthrough! My Word has again found a mouth to utter it! My people will once again be renewed in love. My people will once again rise up in the Holy Spirit of God, and all the world will see that God is our salvation and no other.

Perhaps God has to bring us this low. In a desert such as ours the well has to be dug very deep until we come to the Holy Water.

When first coming to this church as your Pastor I was bright eyed and bushy tailed. I was so prepared. I had been through so much I thought that this church would be a snap! A piece of cake! And then God began bringing me down, down very low. Until I realized I had been beaten. There is no way that Pastor Krey will be able to succeed in this church. I will not be able to turn it around.

I used to talk about the pillars of our church. By them I meant Bessie and Irene Midtlyng. God had to have them leave. I couldn't grasp that. But God had to show us it is not people from whom life comes, but alone from God. In my less mature days, I thought Ralph Midtlyng and Kathy Cassidy (both very young) were the ones this church depended on. How wrong could I be? But I was young. Kathy at the time had about eleven jobs and positions in our church. But more than all that she wanted control over me. And when she could not get it - she resigned as of immediately! And I remember lying on my couch three days feeling like we were absolutely powerless without leaders.

This was done so that we would know and have to relearn many times, that our life does not come from people, but from God. God is our salvation. God can take the railway ties that Eddie threw along our fences, and raise up new leadership for this church. So let's not say that our life comes from leadership.

What a cause for rejoicing! We thought the \$42,000 deficit would do us in. Money is the bottom line. No money, no life. Close the church doors. But God took away our money so that we

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would learn that God is our salvation and money is no salvation, and never has been. (Despite our foolish lottery aspirations!) What a lesson to learn! What a cause for rejoicing.

And then a Spanish mission began - and I thought the Spanish congregation would bring renewal to the remnant here. What a mistake. New members, even minorities won't renew our lives. God alone. God took away the pillars of our church, took away our rental money, took away our whole Spanish congregation, to show us that God alone is our salvation - so that we trust, and do not become afraid - for the Lord God is our strength and our song and has become our salvation.

And what a cause for rejoicing! We have been brought so low, we have reached the Holy Water of God's Word. And people will come to this Well of Salvation and draw water...receive water out of it and dance away rejoicing! Amen.