

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Third Sunday of Advent – Year C

RCL Readings – Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-20

ACNA Readings – Zephaniah 3:14-20; Psalm 85; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-20

Introduction. The season of Advent follows a pattern. In the first week, the theme is the Second Coming and the final judgment of the Lord. The second and third weeks are devoted to the message of the prophets and John the Baptist. In the fourth week of Advent, the focus moves to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Common Theme. The readings today tell of the prophetic message of hope and redemption through the love of God. There is a lot of joy in today's readings. This is contrasted with the harsh tones of John the Baptist in the Gospel as he urges us to be practical about our faithfulness to God.

Zephaniah 3:14-20. The context of this chapter is Zephaniah's contrast between the righteous and holy God and wicked Jerusalem. The fortunes and faith of the people of Israel are congruent with the corruption of the city, the temple and its leadership. Unfaithful leaders result in unfaithful people. This is true today as much as it was true of the past. The prophet declares the good news that, following judgement, there will be hope and restoration. The people have good reasons to sing about the coming redemption. The Lord's judgements have passed, and the enemy has turned away, but the real reason to rejoice is the presence of God. Zephaniah's prophetic image of redemption and consolation is the Lord in the midst of the people with the power to save. God takes joy in his people because he loves them and gives them rest from their troubles. While the people delight in that rest and salvation, God sings over his people in their midst. God's voice spoke light from darkness at creation. God's voice also sings love and salvation over his people. Sometimes we underestimate the joy that God has for his people. Let's recall again the reason for the coming season of Christmas: 'God so loved the world'. It was God's amazing, all-consuming love that sent Jesus into the midst of his people to seek and save the lost.

Isaiah 12:2-6 (Canticle 9).¹ This piece of sung liturgy is a beautiful declaration of the confidence we can have in the Lord. Isaiah announces that it is God who saves. This is an important recognition that we should not look to government programs and institutions for salvation. You and I cannot save ourselves. That is a good confession to make. When we say that 'God is my salvation', we are also saying that 'I am not my salvation'. The peace that passes all understanding comes from the confidence that salvation is in God, with the result being our trust in him who removes the fear and uncertainty of the future. Isaiah reminds us that we have a responsibility towards the Lord for his redemption. We are to make 'his deeds known among the people'. Christmas is coming, and we should not keep silent about the real meaning, the true hope, and the miracle of Jesus. Secular culture has taken Christmas and

¹ This week, instead of a reading from the Psalms, we have a canticle from the New Testament. A canticle is a liturgical song or hymn that is taken from the words of Scripture (except the Psalms as they are already songs). The Book of Common Prayer lists 21 canticles, although there are many more in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

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commercialized it. In so doing, the mystery of Immanuel (God with us) is lost, and the voice of hope is drowned out in shopping sales. Let our trust in the Lord's salvation to remove all fear and give us renewed confidence to share the good news of Messiah this Christmas.

Philippians 4:4-9. Paul repeats here the theme that resonates throughout this Epistle: 'rejoice always' and in all circumstances. Urging someone to be happy when clearly their circumstances are not joyful ones might seem insensitive and lacking in empathy. Paul is not instructing us to be exuberant because of some positive mental attitude that we attain or to see the world with rose-tinted glasses. Rather Paul can call us to rejoice purely because God is in control of all things, both of the good times and of the bad times. Much of the early church lived with the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus. They also lived with the expectation of probable persecution. Paul declares this awareness by saying, 'the Lord is at hand'. Believing that Jesus is close makes rejoicing in any circumstance all that easier, for when the Messiah returns he will make all things right again. This is a great hope that the Church can offer the world which perhaps cannot see a solution to the constant fears and problems it endures. We are commanded by Paul not to be anxious about anything. Paul says this not as a request nor as a suggestion for the believer, but this is a command. Stress can be a horrible burden emotionally, and prolonged stress can be quite dangerous to our physical health. Paul encourages us to set aside our worries and anxieties, not because things are not important or of no concern, but because we should have an active dependence on the goodness and benevolence of God, who hears our prayers and knows our concerns more intimately than we do. God will provide, perhaps not always in the way we would expect or desire, but he will provide what is required through his generous love, and for that, we should always be thankful.

Luke 3:7-18. John the Baptist is from a priestly family. His parents served in the temple. John is the firstborn of Zechariah the priest and in the line of descendants from Aaron, yet he does not work as a priest. He has been touched by the Holy Spirit in the womb and functions in the prophetic role. Prophets can be expected to produce some fiery preaching at times, but to insult your audience by calling them a brood of vipers might be considered a bit over the top. In the parallel Gospel account of Matthew 3:7, John has his attention on the Sadducees and Pharisees that came to him for baptism, not the common people of Israel. John was not interested in softening his message to the unfaithful corrupt leadership of his day. In response to his preaching, the people ask, 'What shall we do then?' We see the same question asked of Peter following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit after he had preached in the temple area on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37). The people do not ask what they should believe because they already believe in the Almighty and that he will send the Messiah. One of the reasons they had come to be baptized in the first place was because they already believed in God and his prophets. John's answer was relatively theologically simple: bear fruit that proves your repentance. Show your faith by your actions and be doers of the Word and not hearers only. John admonishes the people to share, to be fair in all business dealings, to be happy with what you get and not to be mean and cruel to others. Oddly enough, these are the sorts of things we like to teach our children to this very day. As a prophet, John then pointed to the One who was coming after himself. People had initially assumed that John might be the

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Messiah. John understood his role as forerunner of the Messiah but may have mistaken the exact immediate messianic agenda of Jesus. John says that the Messiah would bring the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but there would also be a baptism of fire. For John, the advent of the Messiah would herald the day of judgement. John is not wrong concerning the coming judgement, but his timing was askew. The messianic agenda of Jesus during his first advent was to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven and to procure redemption and salvation for many through the New Covenant. This is and always will be good news to the people.

ACNA Reading

Psalm 85. Psalm 85 is attributed to the Son of Korah, a special Levitical family that was charged with carrying the Ark of the Covenant when the Israelites wandered the wilderness. Korah led an unfortunate rebellion against Moses which ended poorly for Korah. The incident is recorded in Numbers 16. The descendants of Korah learned their father's lesson and became worship leaders in the temple, contributing several psalms. The Psalms are the prayer book of the Jewish people, and you can truly know people's theology by how they pray. This psalm is full of many theological principles. As we read this psalm carefully, remember that Jewish people would have been praying this prayer while in Jerusalem and in the temple. The psalm acknowledges that God cares for his land, that he also cares for his people, and he forgives his people's sins. No mention is made of temple sacrifices as the means of procuring forgiveness. The prayer acknowledges it is the Lord who forgives; it is not the blood of bulls and goats that forgives. The psalm acknowledges the wrath of God in the past, and there is great relief in knowing that God's anger has abated. The psalmist then calls for revival, which is God given and not man-made. Revival, mercy, and salvation come from the Lord. The salvation of God is brought about through the steadfast love of the Lord.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.