

“All Great Spirituality Comes from...”

***A Homily by Stephen Martz for the people of Holy Innocents & St. Nicholas
17 December 2006***

***Zephaniah 3:14-20 + Isaiah 12:2-6 + Philippians 4:4-7 +
Luke 3:7-18***

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, shouts the prophet Zephaniah.

Rejoice in the Lord always, sings Paul, *again I will say, Rejoice.*

-- Pause --

You brood of vipers, who warned you...

Has this always struck you as an odd juxtaposition of readings? It has me. Put it all together and it comes out, *Rejoice, you brood of vipers, again I say, Rejoice!* Huh?

Why on this Sunday, known as Gaudete or Rejoice, Sunday; when we change into rose-colored vestments and sing of joy, when the first two readings center on joy and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding: why on this Sunday does the church also give us John the Baptist thundering at us to repent and bear fruit?

I can't say for sure. The juxtaposition *is* odd, but perhaps not as odd as it first seems. For, when we think about it, is not our joy inevitably incomplete so long as others suffer? How fully can we rejoice when we know of people who have no winter coat? When we know we have neighbors who do not have enough to eat?

I wonder if the issue is not still deeper. The crowds ask John, *What then should we do?* and he tells them: share with the needy and be just. Well, okay. But do we really need the Messiah to tell us this? It's not exactly rocket science.

What strikes me more than the answer is the question. Those who have to ask the obvious are in trouble already. They've lost touch with their own center. Indeed, as I hear today's gospel, they've lost touch with their Creator.

They believe their descent from Abraham is their lottery ticket, or an insurance policy. They are no longer connected to the awesome power of the living God. Why else would John have to remind them, *God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*

Their condition is the opposite of what Paul describes when he says *the Lord is near* and urges the Philippians to *let their gentleness be known*, to be free of worry, and to let their hearts be open to God. Those to whom John preaches are people who have lost touch with themselves and their God.

So it is with us. There are times in our lives when the peace of God is fully with us and all we need do is relax and *let our requests be made known to God*. And there are other times when we need a John to jolt us, to remind us that we are creature, not Creator, and to lead us kicking and repenting back to God.

I've been thinking this week about both conditions, and I've been thinking about them in two ways – in our church life and in our individual lives. First, our church life. I've been reminded recently through conversations with colleagues of how easy it is for churches to lose touch with the transforming power of God.

Our God is a God of change and transformation, of metanoia (to use a Greek word for this) and conversion. Our God empties herself, takes on human form, teaches, heals, is killed, and rises from the dead. Our God is one who liberates his people from slavery, picks unlikely prophets, and creates human life out of clay.

We people of God, created in God's image, are also people of change and transformation. But, say many of us, we don't like change, we want things to stay as they are, and so we keep forgetting all that change and transformation stuff.

We think church exists to make us feel good. That the purpose of church is to offer us a pleasant Sunday morning experience, using this or that type of music, with this or that kind of preaching, in this or that style. I'm thinking of a couple of parishes I heard about this week.

But we ourselves are not immune to forgetting. Those at this week's bishop's committee saw, as I did, the anxiety level rise when someone raised the possibility of common worship for our two congregations. We remained polite – we're still in that stage – but we were *very* uneasy. It was clear that some in each parish don't like that *they* don't do what *we* do and think *they* should be like *us*.

So perhaps, like many other churches, we ourselves need a bit of John the Baptist jolt to help us remember that pleasant aesthetics, nice people, and familiar routines do not a church make. We become church when we transform lives – our own and others. *Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Whoever has two coats must share.*

The other thing that stood out for me at the bishop's committee meeting was the great pain that some of us feel as the time comes to let go of the building that has

long been our spiritual home. This leads me into the joy and pain we experience in our individual lives.

As I was reflecting a couple of days ago on what exactly I wanted to say about this, the mail arrived and with it a pithy sentence from the Franciscan, Richard Rohr: *All great spirituality comes from what we do with our pain. All great spirituality comes from what we do with our pain.*

So what are we going to make from our collective and individual pain? Something great? Or something small? Advent, and especially this Third Sunday of Advent, invites us to know our pain against the backdrop of hope. *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel!...The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.*

During this season we wait -- hoping, preparing. That is, we live in the belief that God has come into our midst and this has changed everything. This belief is the heart of Christian hope and Christian joy. It is what leads Paul to proclaim, *Rejoice in the Lord always.*

But just as churches sometimes forget their reason for being, we human beings also sometimes fail to remember that the Incarnation and especially the Resurrection have changed everything. When we lose sight of hope, knowing only the starkness of our pain, we become unconscious, and often are overtaken by gloom and anger, complaining and criticizing -- and these prevent us from developing and living a great spirituality.

Advent challenges us to be fully conscious of the mystery that grows as we wait in hope; to be fully conscious of God's tremendous love for us embodied through the

Incarnation of Jesus as fully human. John the Baptist comes to us today to jolt us out of our unconsciousness – and we would all do well to befriend our inner John.

We need him if we are to stay awake, if we are to remain conscious, if we are to continue in hope and live from joy. And so I close with a story about staying awake.

One day a young monk asked his abbot, who was considered to be a very holy man, “How can I be sure when I am in God’s presence?”

The abbot replied, “You have as much control over that as you have power to make the sun rise.”

Full of exasperation the young monk exclaimed, “Then of what use are all our spiritual exercises and prayers.”

“You do these things to make sure you are awake when the sun rises.”

Friends, in the darkness of this present midwinter time, the sun is beginning to rise. May we all be awake to greet the new dawn.