

### Third Sunday of Advent © – December 16, 2018

(Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Ps. Isaiah 12:2-3,4,5-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18;)

Our first reading today is from the prophet Zephaniah. We don't hear from him very much. He was a little older, but lived about the same time as Jeremiah, about 700 years before Jesus. He actually lived during the time of a good king, Josiah, but he foresaw that it would not last. The Temple was the center of Jewish worship. It was a place of the presence of God – his word in the Ten Commandments given through Moses. It was the center of teaching, sacrifice and worship. But it would become corrupted. The leaders and the people would become unfaithful. Because of turning away from God, like many in the world today, they would suffer consequences of all kinds. When God is not a part of our lives we suffer many consequences. It often shows up in violence, unfaithfulness to God, to spouses and to friends. For the Jews it would mean their country and city and temple would be overtaken and destroyed.

But Zephaniah does not leave them with that message alone. He gives them hope. “On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.” Can you imagine God singing for you, because of you? Today, in the middle of Advent, a time of preparing and longing for God, we have a message of hope that God will be in our midst.

It reminds me a little of purgatory – that even though we are suffering for our past sins, it is actually a preparation of the wonder to come – a cleansing in order to fully encounter and embrace an all good and loving God. It is a little like the sacrament of Penance – of confessing our sins, our sorrow and receiving the remedy to prepare us to fully embrace God in the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is an experience of joy, even in the midst of current suffering or sacrifice. That what this Sunday, *Gaudete*, in Latin, is about – the hope and joy, and expectation of what is to come.

That is the message of John the Baptist today, from the Gospel of Luke. The crowds are in expectation of the coming Messiah. They ask John, “What must we do?” He said to them in reply, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” Even tax collectors, known to be sinners, who worked for the Romans and for themselves, asked, “Teacher what should we do?” He answered, stop taking more than what is prescribed.” Even soldiers, I presume, local Roman soldiers, are listening and wonder what to do in preparation. He replied, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone and be satisfied with your wages.” Any one of these responses might apply to us. Do we have more clothes and food than we need and share with those that do not? Are we more concerned with getting more pay than doing a good job? Are we fair with others?

When the great writer G.K. Chesterton was dying a priest friend visited him. Before he left he noticed Chesterton’s pen lying on the table nearby and he went over, picked it up and kissed it. Chesterton had used his wit and reason and his pen to point out someone greater than himself – that is Jesus, as the Son of God and his Church, in the midst of the world – a place of hope even in the midst of suffering.

I remember once when my family took the advice of my oldest sister, who was in the convent at the time, to prepare for Christmas by drawing names. Then during Advent we would do special things for that person. At Christmas time we would then try to guess who had our name. It just happened that I drew Dad’s name. So I remember once, or probably more often, at the end of the day when the chores were done, Dad was the last one to walk from the barn to the house. I hid behind a tree in the house yard till he walked past then I walked with him to the house. At Christmas time he had no trouble guessing who had drawn his name.

But it also just happened that my mother had gotten my name. When my turn came, I first guessed my dad. Finally my mother told me it was her. I was embarrassed to not recognize that, but I was so used to her doing special things for me and each of us that it didn’t occur to me that it might be her. That is what our

life might look like in preparing for Jesus. Like Chesterton, like my parents, like John the Baptist we spend our time and our life pointing to someone greater than ourselves, namely to Jesus.

In fact that is what Christopher West, who teaches marriage preparation based on Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body points out. To focus on oneself is like directing your rocket engine, not to the sky, but to yourself, which leads to self destruction. To spend your life focusing on the good and welfare of someone else leads to fulfillment. As Christians our primary focus must be on Christ Jesus and especially Jesus on the cross. That is key to a successful marriage and a successful and fulfilling life.

Just Friday we celebrated the feast day of St. John of the Cross. With the help of St. Theresa of Avila he worked for the reform of his order of priests and brothers. Both his order and that of St. Theresa had become lax in the exercise of their mission. Many of the other priests and brothers resented what he was trying to do and he was put in their prison. He was not well cared for but he compared life to the journey of a soul to God, to heaven. It was especially through suffering that he could more closely focus on Jesus. He wrote spiritual hymns and songs of joy, even in the midst of his persecution and suffering.

The Mass is our greatest worship to God. It is an expression of thanksgiving and joy, because it is the offering of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to the Father for ourselves and for all for whom we pray. The greatest suffering of God's only begotten Son is turned to the greatest gift of good for all who choose to follow him and imitate him. The sharing of his Body and Blood is a pre-taste of the full joy we receive in heaven. It is an experience of joy here in a life, of sometimes suffering, but always hope in expectation of God in our midst and us with him.

May God bless you that you may prepare well and experience now, and in the life to come, the fullness of joy in Him.