

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 7, 2009

Up this week are the lessons for Advent 3, Sunday, December 13, 2009. As the Advent themes and candle-lighting liturgies turn to "Joy," there is a bit of tension. The first two lessons are upbeat, joyous. Then there's the third, John the Baptist, mincing no words in a call for repentance. Is this joyous? Maybe.

Zephaniah 3: 14 - 20

If you didn't know better, you might think you were in Second Isaiah with its calls to joyous return from exile. Rejoice! Sing aloud! Why? Because the judgments against have been set aside. Case dismissed. Debts cancelled. No more foreclosure. Because "the Lord is in your midst." If that's not enough, there's more. "I will remove disaster from you," and "deal with your oppressors," and change "shame to praise." Finally, "I will bring you home." Home for the holidays. It's what we all hope for, and yet it is what proves elusive. Does the coming of Jesus mean all these things? For sure, if preachers are to deal with this the focus needs to be on the power and promise and work of God.

Philippians 4: 4 - 7

As I've noted in comments on previous Advent epistle lessons, this is (these are) Paul on a good day. A very good day. And yet, paradoxically, Paul is in jail in Corinth. From jail he writes to his beloved partners in ministry in Philippi, connected though distant. Maybe you can "come home," without going there? Paul's own situation is reframed, and he invites others to reframe theirs as well, in light of this: "The Lord is near." The jail and jailers are not in charge, not really. I don't think debating the second-coming or its timing or whether or not Paul expected the immediate return of Jesus is the point, at least not sermonically. There's always need for a larger perspective, for seeing things from the standpoint of eternity when that means not everlasting time but the full or fulfilled time, Advent time. Another way to put this, Paul "reframes" everything, which is a good thing to do, in light of God's purposes and faithfulness. With both Zephaniah and Philippians the point is not forced joy, "let's all get in the holiday spirit, and be happy." It is to focus on what God is doing and reframe your present in that (Advent) light.

Luke 3: 7 - 18

Part two of John the Baptist according to Luke. Can you get to rejoicing without repenting? Can you get to the manger without going through the desert? John says, "You cannot." His words are harsh, no nonsense, threatening. "The ax is laying at the root of the tree." It's hard for me to read these words and not apply them to the travail of mainline Protestantism (see "What's Tony Thinking?" for some John the Baptist type thoughts). But Luke's John is not only focused on the religious types and leaders. He singles out three groups: the crowd, tax-collectors and soldiers and specifies what each is to do. It seems that powerful preaching leads, for Luke, to people asking, "What should we do?" (cf. Acts 2: 38). You want to know what to do, I'll tell you, says John. Do preachers dare risk such clarity and specificity? The closing images of winnowing forks and fire all suggest sorting, refining, purifying. How does

that go with "Joy?" There's the challenge. Keep the focus on God, who God is, what God is doing, and then move to "what then shall we do?"