

3rd Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2009
the Rev. Ken Kroohs

[\(Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18\)](#)

BEING PREPARED FOR GOD

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, High Point, NC

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH ... AND THE MEDITATIONS OF
ALL OUR HEARTS ... BE ALWAYS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU ____
OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER AMEN

For the last 3 weeks we have been talking about Advent, this season before Christmas. I suggested that since most of us have Jesus in our lives to some extent, rather than thinking about Christmas as when Jesus **arrives** in our lives for the first time, or even arrives for a special time, we think about Christmas as a time when a loved one comes to our home.

Then we can imagine these weeks before Christmas as a time when we are **preparing** for the arrival of this special, loved one. Some people speak about "waiting" as the theme for Advent but I suggest that "waiting" implies we are totally ready ... totally and completely ready to meet

our Lord. Therefore I speak about "preparing".

Last week I spoke about preparing for our Lord inwardly - through worship and prayer. I stressed that I believe worship is for **us** - not for God. And that God does not care about the style of our worship, only the sincerity of our worship. Our worship needs to be both joyous and humble. "Humble" in the sense of being aware of our need to repent, to change. Ultimately, I believe, worship is about growing closer to God ... deepening our relationship to God.

Furthermore I believe prayer ultimately has the same primary purpose - to deepen our relationship with God. Certainly prayers should include requests, for ourselves and others. But primarily prayer should be about communicating with God. I love the image of a baby being held by their parent. The parent and child communicate through smiles, and

giggles, and tickles, and motion - deep, important communication with no intellectual content. (In that image WE are the baby.)

To which John Calvin stressed that *"repentance is an inward renewal, which manifests itself in the outward life, as a tree produces its fruit."*

So today I turn to preparing for our Lord in outward manners. How do we prepare in ways that concern and affect other people?

Today's lessons are perfect. One thing they illustrate is some of the thematic, theological differences between the Old Testament and the New. Have you ever considered the differences between the time before Jesus and the time after Jesus?

Understand that I don't believe God changed, or that parts of the Bible are wrong. I do believe God's relationship with humans changed over

time, and possibly is still changing. That is not because God changes, but because human beings change. God's relationship with an isolated tribe on a mountain in South America has to be different from God's relationship with us. It has to be different because we are different!

So consider the differences between Zephaniah and John the Baptist. The best known difference is in the type of messiah being expected. Zephaniah, and all the Old Testament, expects a warrior king. A true descendent of the great warrior David. A messiah who would lead the Jewish people out of bondage and into strength - strength enough to avoid being conquered and possibly strength enough to conquer.

You still get hints of that in John the Baptist but Jesus keeps attempting to explain that is not the type of messiah He is to be. Rather than conquering we hear "*if your enemy*

strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other". Very different.

But the second difference might not be as well understood. Notice again Zephaniah – *"rejoice and exult with all your hearts! the Lord has taken away the judgements ... your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory .. will remove disaster from you .. God deal with all your oppressors"*. Notice that in addition to the warrior messiah, you hear about a messiah who will do it **all**. The people are only called to rejoice and exult – not do anything.

At bit of an aside – I think there MAY be a parallel with the way God's relationship with human beings changes ... and the way a parent's relationship with the child changes as the child gets older. The child takes on more responsibility. ... MAYBE that's what's happening.

Consider what John the Baptist

tells us to do. How John tells us to prepare to meet our Lord. When John says God can raise up stones to be His children, John is telling us **not** to depend on God to do everything SIMPLY because we are God's children. Rather we must "bear fruits worthy of repentance" - worthy of God's involvement in our lives.

DO NOT TAKE THIS TOO FAR! It can easily blow up. We are not talking about EARNING God's love and involvement in any way. And it is really not a partnership - even if we think of God as the very senior partner. Rather it is closer to the saying that *"With God we cannot ... without us God will not"*

For whatever reason God decided from the first to give us the free will to either make this world better - or not. I believe God is very active in the world, very active in making it better ... but not in an *obviously miraculous, snap the fingers*

and change things manner. Rather God is working HARD to improve this world **through** us.

John tells us to be aware that the end times are near. And true, John is approaching it from the direction I don't like ... the "be very afraid" direction The "work for God out of fear" direction.

But notice the last line in this passage: "he proclaimed the good news to the people" ... the good news that God is present and active in their lives. The good news that this world can be better if we are willing to do our share. The good news that we can prepare for the arrival of our loved one, our Lord in very tangible ways.

Notice too what John does NOT call for. John does not tell anyone to throw their bodies in front of a tank - although those who do so are to be commended that is not the standard. He does not tell us to sell everything

we have and give it to the poor (Jesus tells the rich man to do that to make a point). John does not tell us to give up our jobs so we can spend all day in church (when Paul says to "pray unceasingly he is speaking about praying WHILE we live our lives). John does not tell us to leave our lives.

No, interestingly John tells us to live our lives - the lives we now have - in a loving and Christian manner. He tells us to share from our bounty ... which we have. He tells us to be honest in our dealings with other people. John tells us to avoid dominating and mis-treating other people. John tells us to accept the spiritual power, and responsibility which is offered to us ... and then live as if we have.

Notice how the Philippians lesson bridges and completes Zephaniah and John the Baptist. Like Zephaniah, Paul says to rejoice ... rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in God's presence

in your life. Always rejoice.

But unlike Zephaniah, more like John the Baptist and Jesus, Paul says to "let your gentleness be known to everyone" ... gentleness can only be known through actions and observation. So this is about how we live our lives.

And Paul then speaks about the inward preparation to make our requests known to God WITH thanksgiving. I suspect there is an extremely important, although extremely subtle teaching in that language.

It says to make the request "with" thanksgiving. That says to me the thanksgiving is NOT that our request has been fulfilled. It is not thanksgiving that we really did win the lottery! Rather it is thanksgiving that we have a relationship with God ... a relationship with a **GOD** ... we ignore how amazing that is all by itself ...

Keeping with the parallel, much as a child takes their parents for granted we take God for granted.

Be thankful we have a relationship with God which allows us, even encourages us to make those requests. We are thankful for the relationship and confident that God will work in ways that are best for us.

Which this is a really loaded set of teachings!!! thanksgivings for our relationship with God and confident God will work in the ways that are best for us which "surpasses all understanding". We will not fully understand. We will struggle and question and doubt and get angry but ultimately have to rest in faith that God is smarter than we are. So the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will **guard** our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.

If anyone can study these passages

and announce they are fully prepared
for Jesus - it will not be me! These
are both amazing challenges and
amazing promises.

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recent sermon just enter: www.st-christopher.org/sermon.html.

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