

## A Terrifying Gospel – Ben Wayman

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

An older friend recently commented to me that it's a blessing to have time to prepare for your death. This morning I would like to suggest that Advent season is a time to prepare for our death. This may sound a bit darker than the kind of sermon you were expecting to hear just 9 days before Christmas, but I think it truthfully describes the kind of Gospel we Christians stake our lives on.

The title of this sermon is "A Terrifying Gospel." I think this is what Luke is trying to convey when he states in verse 18: "So, with many other exhortations, [John the Baptist] proclaimed the good news to the people." An exhortation is urgent counsel to do something. For John the Baptist, Christ's coming requires many such exhortations in order for it to be good news.

Advent season, John Massena reminded us last week, is a time for slowing down and preparing for the coming of Christ. John pointed out that we are expecting two comings of Christ during Advent. The first coming is the Christmas one, when God became man to set us free from sin, death, and the devil. The second coming is the last days one, when Christ will return as judge of all people – living and dead. Advent is all about Christ's coming, and our lessons today are arranged to make sure we get this straight.

Our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Zephaniah announces twice in seven short verses: the LORD is in your midst. The way Zephaniah talks about it here, having the LORD in your midst is like having Superman swoop in to take care of the school bully once and for all. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. No more wedgies, or stolen lunch money, or weak knees every time you set foot on campus; the LORD is in your midst.

The prophet Isaiah has a similar view of God as superhero. This passage is one of my favorite passages from the prophet, and it's a passage we read together regularly at Morning Prayer. Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. There is no confusion here: we need salvation and salvation is God's business. God is the one who saves us.

Christians can do a lot worse than the view of God as superhero. In fact, Christ as Victor is a view of God that can be found all over early Christian writings. It's one of my favorite views because it clearly states that our story is really about God and how he's just so **awesome**. When we begin to take ourselves too seriously, it's great to be reminded that God is our salvation...the LORD GOD is our strength and our might. This reminder is particularly helpful

for those of us who have a bit of a savior-complex and think it's our job to make things come out right.

But this view of God as Warrior does not capture the whole of God. Leave it to John the Baptist to fill out the picture a bit more for us. In our Gospel reading today, we meet John the Baptist and hear from him for the very first time: Enter John: You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? What an opening line. John points out that having God in our midst is not only about being set free, but it's also about being called to account for our lives. So Christ's coming is also about judgment.

John the Baptist lays it on thick in three points that just as well apply to us. First, he says we need to repent. God's wrath is coming and we've either been living like this isn't true or we've deceived ourselves into thinking God's wrath is for someone else. Second, we need to reconsider. We need to reconsider our current confidence, because just as Israel settled on Abraham, there's a good chance we have settled on something less than God. Third, we need to start living as though Christ is really coming. I'll call this an exhortation to Restart. So here are the three: Repent. Reconsider. Restart.

I began this morning by suggesting that we think of Advent as a time to prepare for our death, and so here's what I mean by that. John gives us an opportunity to prepare for our own death by restarting everything that's dying in our lives. This is how we prepare for Christ's coming.

After hearing John the Baptist's doomsday sermon – what I described a moment ago as his sermon to Repent, Reconsider, and Restart – the crowd is desperate: What then should we do? What's interesting about the crowd's question and about John's response is that **doing** is exactly what is called for. John is not calling out for more desert mystics and private prayers; he's calling out for better community.

Living together is not enough for John. Rather, we need to live together well. This is what makes community and this is what prepares a people for Christ's coming. John gives four examples of what good community, godly community, looks like and they all come in the form of exhortations.

Exhortation number one: **share your abundance**. Scarcity is not the problem. Our greed is the problem. John's counsel here is really pretty tame for the desert-radical that he is. He's not telling us to give away our only coat – to sell all we have in order to prepare for Christ's coming. No. He's being quite reasonable: If you have more than you need, share it with someone in need.

Every Sunday after church, there is more than enough Communion bread to feed everyone again. It is only when people take more than they should that we have the problem of others going without. What if at the end of every Sunday service, when we eat the remaining body of

Christ, each person received a piece and shared a piece? This is John's first exhortation: We prepare for Christ's coming by sharing our abundance.

John's second exhortation for good community is to tell the truth. In response to even tax collectors who had come to be baptized, John exhorts: Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. In other words, tell the truth. The problem with lying is that it constructs a shadow of what is real. The whole community becomes a sham when it is built on deception. John's counsel here is for tax collectors to honestly engage their neighbors.

Recently it came to light that a family friend had been living an elaborate lie. We did not know that he had been out of work for more than a year. We did not know that he had been having an affair for several months. We did not anticipate that he would leave his community to live with another woman and her children. The truth is, this man had been living a lie and it had become impossible for him to sustain real community. So he had little choice but to settle for the shadow he had constructed. So, John's second exhortation is to prepare for Christ's coming by telling the truth.

John's third and fourth exhortations, his advice for good community and for repenting, reconsidering and restarting one's life in preparation for Christ's coming, are given in response to the Soldiers who asked him, And we, what should we do?

In response to the soldiers, John exhorts them not to bully and to be content. It's an interesting combination. The assumption here is that dissatisfaction – whether it be with our salary, or with some other dynamic of our life – can turn us into bullies. Bullies are simply people who intimidate others. And it's amazing how easy it is to become one.

Take parenting, for example. It's amazing to me how quickly parenting can devolve into bullying. There is a fine line, I think, between demanding obedience with an intent look and bullying your child. Of course, threatening looks aren't the most obvious ways parents can bully their children. I employ any number of strategies to persuade my boys to obey. At the heart of the bullying, I think, is a dissatisfaction with the gift of patience. Patience is the wage parents receive from God to raise our children. Daily, we must choose to be satisfied with God's gift of patience to care for our children. So John's third and fourth exhortations to prepare for Christ's coming are not to bully and to be content.

This year, like every year Michelle and I have lived in Greenville, we made the trek out to the Daniken tree farm for a Christmas tree. As always, we got the same kind of tree – a Scotch Pine. Supposedly Scotch Pines are the "hadiest Christmas tree grown." But a few days without water will apparently kill any tree, and so our tree will be lucky if it makes it to Christmas. If our tree had a mind and soul, I would strongly encourage it to prepare for its death.

Of course, a tree can't repent or reconsider or restart any more than it can learn to share, or tell the truth, or be content with its lot. But we can. This Advent season, we are invited to prepare

for Christ's coming, just as we might prepare for our death. Christ's coming is nearly as terrible as it is good news. Christ's coming is all about God-with-us. And God-with-us means not only that he will save us from our oppressors, but also that he refuses for us to continue to live lives toward death.

Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite theologians, has a reflection on "Being Ready to Die." I would like to close with his reflection, and I would like you to think about how being ready to die is like being ready for Christ's coming. Here's what Nouwen says:

"Death often happens suddenly. A car accident, a plane crash, a fatal fight, a war, a flood, and so on. When we feel healthy and full of energy, we do not think much about our death. Still, death might come very unexpectedly.

How can we be prepared to die? By not having any unfinished relational business. The question is, Have I forgiven those who have hurt me and asked forgiveness from those I have hurt? When I feel at peace with all the people who are part of my life, my death might cause great grief, but it will not cause guilt or anger.

When we are ready to die at any moment, we are also ready to live at any moment." (Bread for the Journey)

Being ready to die has everything to do with being ready for God to be with us. May we, this Advent, be ready for Christ's coming. Amen.