

Sermon Advent 3C
The Rev. Wendy D. Cliff
St. Stephen's Belvedere
December 13, 2015

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#)

[Isaiah 12:2-6](#)

[Philippians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 3:7-18](#)

*"Rejoice and exalt with all your heart....
The Lord, your God, is in your midst....
Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy,
For the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel....
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice,
The Lord is near....*

*You brood of vipers!...
Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, every tree therefore that does not bear good
fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...
His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into his
granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

I had a hard time with the scripture passages this week. I struggled to reconcile the disparity between all the rejoicing in the first 3 readings, and then the fire and brimstone in the Gospel. I was happily going along with all the joy and praise and comfort and restoration in Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Philippians. Then suddenly I felt the sting of John the Baptist calling me a viper, threatening to cut me down for not bearing fruit, and Jesus stoking the flames of an unquenchable fire fueled by me.

But then I realized this whiplash experience, this sudden sharp contrast between rejoicing and judgment allowed me to actually understand the exact type of repentance John is talking about. If repentance means a total turning around so you face the right direction and have a complete change of heart and mind, then that's what happens when we pay attention to the readings this week. We stop and turn and stand in a completely different place when we hear the Gospel.

This past week, I had a visceral experience of this very kind of repentance or turning around. As some of you know, I have volunteered in Marin City with the Hannah Project for the past 7 years. This non-profit strives to bridge the education achievement gap for minority children in Marin through tutoring, advocacy, cultural

education, and the founding of a Children's Defense Fund summer Freedom School. Lately, the Hannah Project, along with the Marin Interfaith Council, has been hosting a series of book group discussions on race. We've read The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson, Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates, White Like Me by Tim Wise, and in January, we'll meet to discuss Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. A few St. Stephen's people have joined us and more are welcome.

But this last week, instead of the usual book discussion, we paused to explore white privilege in a deeper way. We participated in an exercise called a "Privilege Walk."¹ Some of you may have done this at work or with another group. If you don't know what it is, it's an exercise to help people become aware of how power and privilege are at work in our lives and in society, especially those influences of which we aren't aware. It's not about casting blame or donning hair shirts of shame. Instead, it's designed to promote honest discussion and increased awareness about the obstacles and benefits we all encounter. The exercise allowed us to look not only at racism, but many other biases based on religion, gender, sexual preference, and age. It was not about making people feel guilty for various privileges; it was about noticing forces and impacts.

We were a group of about 25 people of different faith traditions; all white except for 1 Latina and 2 blacks. We started out standing in a single line, shoulder to shoulder. The leader then listed a series of statements to which we were instructed to either take one step forward or one step backward. Here are just a few examples:

- If there have been times in your life when you skipped a meal because there was no food in the house, take one step backward.
- If there were more than 50 books in your house when you grew up, take one step forward.
- If you have visible or invisible disabilities, take one step backward.
- If your work holidays coincide with religious holidays that you celebrate, take one step forward.
- If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward.

¹ University of Albany, School of Social Welfare, "Module 5: Privilege Walk Activity."
http://www.albany.edu/ssw/efc/pdf/Module%205_1_Privilege%20Walk%20Activity.pdf (accessed 12/8/15).

- If you feel good about how your identified culture is portrayed by the media, take one step forward.
- If growing up, your family owned your home, take one step forward.
- If you took out loans for your education, take one step backward.

After the leader had finished reading over 30 such statements, but before we were invited to turn and look around the room, we were asked to close our eyes and were led in prayer. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel and hear the woman standing next to me turn around while we were praying. Part of me wanted to follow her lead because, needless to say, like her, I was at the front of the room and as each statement had been read, I could feel the chasm opening up between some of the other people in the room and me. My back felt exposed and vulnerable. I wanted to put on a coat to cover my back. But I was afraid to turn around.

When the prayer was over and I did finally turn around, I saw my two black colleagues, women with degrees from Berkeley and Harvard, standing at the other end of the room. The space between us was immense. All I wanted to do was rush over and close that gap. But we didn't move. The group stayed there for a little while longer and talked honestly, yet tentatively, about how each of us felt in the spot we'd landed in relation to others.

Shame and white guilt don't help anyone; not blacks, not whites. Repentance is not about shame or guilt. It's about making sure our perspectives are in line with God's one dream of a world described by the prophet Zephaniah where God will bring the exiled and oppressed home and turn their shame into gladness. As a person of privilege, reared on the mantra that I could achieve anything I put my mind toward and everyone should simply pull themselves up by their bootstraps, I've repented. I've turned around to see a different perspective that's not only more in line with God's dream for humanity, but now sees some of the realities of how being in or outside of the cultural majority plays out in our country.

But what should we do, asks the crowd in Luke's gospel? "What should you and I do?" we ask. Most of us have already done what John first suggests to the crowd: I mean, just last month alone we gave away 139 rain coats and ponchos, 243 pairs of sock, and over 60 bags of food. And I know us to be ethical people in our personal and professional dealings. So what else are we supposed to do?

For me, the answer is in John's next comments about Jesus baptizing us with the Holy Spirit and fire. This is a direct reference to the other place Luke talks about the Holy Spirit and fire in the Book of Acts. At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit and fire came, they descended upon the Apostles and filled them with such joy and power that they were able to communicate with people of different faiths and nationalities. A new world order was initiated. The church was born. When we were baptized, we were born into that community, a community that by the power of the Holy Spirit can create new realities, new hope, and has the courage to walk into the gaps of injustice. We can take Jesus' ax and attack the root causes of poverty. We can take Jesus' winnowing fork and do the advocacy work to separate truth and goodness from oppression and greed. The Holy Spirit can set us on fire to use our voices, our power and privilege to challenge injustice, as long as we have the courage to see it.

Repentance is messy and uncomfortable. It doesn't necessarily mean problems are solved when we turn around, but as Christians, we know that Jesus will meet us in that gap because we know Jesus' ministry was about forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. We were baptized into that ministry. We can, with confidence, approach hard and scary subjects like racism and privilege, knowing that Jesus will guide us. I'm telling you: Jesus showed up for the Privilege Walk in Marin City. He showed up as rich and poor, blacks, whites and Latinas shared and listened to each other's experiences and feelings. Hearts were broken and hearts were healed. I invite you to join me for one or more of these encounters. One important encounter we're just about to have makes all the difference in our ability to do this work.

One reason priests make such a big deal of breaking the loaf of bread during communion, pausing to hold it up high after it's broken so everyone can see it, is so we remember our brokenness, so we remember all the gaps out there that are caused by race or gender or politics or religion. Jesus will feed us. Jesus will unite us, strengthening us to fill those gaps in our own hearts and in our communities and the world.

In Advent, are we waiting for a God who becomes flesh and blood, bridges the gap between God and humanity, rich and poor, Christian and Muslim, black and white, broken and whole. Come, Lord Jesus; come.