

3 Advent – Year C – December 13, 2009
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
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According to one website with the dubious name of *Math for Morons Like Us*, in geometry, parallel lines are defined as coplanar lines that do not intersect. Elsewhere, the definition is even simpler: “lines are parallel if they lie in the same plane, and are the same distance apart over their entire length.” Aside from the mathematical definition, there is, of course, another definition to the word parallel. It can also mean corresponding or comparable.

There are several parallels from our readings for this, the third Sunday of Advent, sometimes known by the Latin word *gaudete*, which in the imperative means rejoice! The rose candle on our Advent wreath is pink today to symbolize joy. The prophet Zephaniah offers a glimpse of joy, in the promise of a hopeful future. The canticle exhorts us to trust in the Lord and not be afraid, and then to sing the praises of the Lord. The reading from Philippians is a hymn of joy. Then we have part two of John the Baptist, hissing about the brood of vipers nestled cozily in their temporal power structures, and warning us to flee from the wrath to come. Admittedly, that doesn’t sound very joyous, except that John is proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to the people: a time when the lowly will be lifted high, and when God’s justice will reign. Even better, the crowds are listening, eager to “bear fruit worthy of repentance”. And so we have three Advent themes to examine today: prophets, promise, and parallels. All of which unfold another piece of God’s purpose in the history of salvation.

Pastor Deborah Block says this about prophets. “Prophets say what no one wants to hear, what no one wants to believe. Prophets point in directions no one wants to look. They hear God when everybody else has concluded God is silent. They see God where nobody else would guess that God is present.... Prophets sing God’s song and sometimes interrupt the program with a change a tune.” This is most surely the case with both Zephaniah and with John the Baptist. Most of the book of Zephaniah is a tirade of God’s judgment, lamenting the idolatry and corruption of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Written around the 7th century B.C. when the Israelites were either already suffering massive defeat by their enemies or feeling the close threat of the same, Zephaniah sets the stage for King Josiah’s reform of 621 B.C. By that point, the people were ready to repent and return to the Lord their God. On a parallel track, in what would become the early years of the first century, the Israelites have again found themselves under the guidance of unscrupulous leaders. Enter John who appears in the wilderness offering a baptism of repentance, to make the people ready for the promised Messiah. Jesus will offer a lot more than just religious reform.

In God’s word through the prophet Zephaniah this morning, the Lord promises salvation and restoration, a time of comfort and joy, after the suffering of the period of judgment is complete. There is no doubt that God never desires that we suffer. A world without sin could only be one where all the people lived as Christ lived, in perfect obedience to God’s will. Our reality is much different. Our suffering is a consequence of humanity’s sinfulness, including our own sins, and the distorting and destructive ripple effect that misdeeds and inaction continues to have on all of God’s creation. Nevertheless, throughout salvation history, the record shows how, in steadfast love and mercy, God consistently redeems our suffering, working all things together for good to serve His purposes. Above all, in times of suffering God sends His prophets to bring hope to the people. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, “biblical thought always understands hope as the expectation of a good future which rests on God’s promise.”

In both Zephaniah and John’s words from Luke’s gospel reading, God’s promise is manifest in action. We are not talking busy work here or “to do” lists that are more about pleasing ourselves or others than pleasing God. Even though the Lord knows we are probably all guilty of that kind of busyness, especially at this time of the year. In fact, both Zephaniah and John are quite specific about the kind of acts that draw us closer to God. What we particularly hear in Luke’s Gospel today is John’s call to

repentance as the precursive act that helps us to be more aware of God's constant presence. As we saw last week, repentance is a key element in our own preparations for Christ's coming again in glory. Either in our return to a right relationship with God, or out of sheer gratitude to God, we find ourselves compelled to respond through ethical acts, in accord with God's will. Social injustice does not reflect God's character or the nature of God's covenant with His children. Throughout the Scriptures, there are numerous examples of God's desire to lift up the humble and lowly and to care for the least in society. God consistently restores the oppressed and marginalized to full communion with God's self and with the community of God's people. In Zephaniah, these deeds are found in the love and care of the lame and the outcasts, who carry the burden of the people's shameful behavior piled high on their shoulders. In Luke, John is questioned closely about the fruits of a good life and speaks about sharing generously with those in need. When it comes to money, we are told to live within our means, and not to misuse power for financial gain. With increasing globalization, has come great power. Corporations have the leverage to effectively bully the most desperate into questionable work practices that you and I would be protected against by law. As consumers, we are largely distanced from these business shenanigans, and so it has become harder for us to recognize, acknowledge and repent of our own complicity in these shameful acts of manipulation and the abuse of power. Several steps removed from the primary source of unjust labor practices, or disregard for the stewardship of creation in manufacturing processes, we simply accept the benefits of low cost goods and services without question. Advent is a great time to start asking those hard questions. It is also a great time to make repentance a tangible act of changing our buying habits, and simplifying our lives, bringing to life the promise of God's justice in Jesus' Name.

Since Advent begins the new liturgical year, it is also a good time to reflect on the past twelve months. I truly believe that as a community of faith we have had an awesome year in our ministry together. We have continued to grow in the ways that we practice God's graciousness, love, and justice to our neighbors both near and far. Here are just a few examples. Every first Sunday of the month, we share the blessing of food with our ministry partner, the Love Kitchen, in our first fruits giving. The Bread of Life mission collection basket is filled and refilled with your gifts of love for the homeless on the Mountain. After every worship service and at our hospitality events, we gather together and drink fair trade coffee. Similarly, at our recent Gift Fair, we supported just and equitable wages for some of the poorest people in the world through the purchase of beautiful fair trade crafts and goods. From the Women's Group penny jar funds, we also collected enough money to buy a goat through Episcopal Relief & Development, and other donations were given for Heifer International. Closer to home, many of you supported our first mission trip to Leupp in partnership with FaithWorks. Yesterday, many hands made it a very special morning for all the children and families we honored through our Angel Tree party. Earlier in the year, children's laughter filled the air at our vacation bible school. And dozens of young men riding to promote awareness of people with disabilities experienced our hospitality. We have proclaimed Our Saviour's name through the streets of Show Low in blazing sun, and freezing cold, and shared food from around the world. Our cookies and gifts have blessed the brave men and women half way around the world, and so much more. Inspired by gratitude, our hands have not grown weak in sharing God's love in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It may seem foolish to the world, but in the mystery and paradox of God, the future is also the present, and the present is filled with the joy and hope of God's promise of salvation and everlasting life. Just as the prophets proclaimed, the parallel lines of our lives meet in the joyful fulfillment of God's purposes, through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. It has been said that, "joy is the echo of God's life within us" (Joseph Marmion). So let us all rejoice in the goodness of God. Rejoice in the coming of Christ! Rejoice because God rejoices over us with gladness. Rejoice, because God renews us with His love.

Amen.