

3 Advent Luke 3:7-18
Christ and Grace December 16, 2018
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I am a planner, and a bit of a perfectionist. I like to know what to expect and tend to get comfortable with the way things are. Growing up Baptist I knew nothing about Advent wreaths because there was no such thing in our church. When we got married, Paul and I became Episcopalians, and were introduced to the season of Advent, and to the Advent wreath. There was no pink candle in the Advent wreath at our church in Memphis, TN, so when we returned to Richmond with our young family, finding a pink candle in the Advent wreath at our new church was not what I expected. Not only was it not what I expected, it was unsettling! By this time, I had seen 4 purple candles for so long, that one pink candle stood out like a giant pink sore thumb! It messed up the symmetry and irritated the heck out of my perfectionistic tendencies.

Then, lo and behold, it's my first Christmas at Christ and Grace, and in this beautiful church with a blue ceiling and blue altar hangings we have blue candles! All of this is to say that my assumptions about what to expect in Advent and in the church are always being challenged. You may be wondering why we don't have a pink candle. This year we made a decision to use blue Advent candles to coordinate with our blue altar hangings, and since I had heard you did not always have a pink candle in the past, this year we opted for all blue. So what color are Advent candles supposed to be? What should we do?

The season of Advent was originally more like Lent, having a penitential theme. The liturgical color for Lent is purple. But over time the season of Advent has shifted its focus to one of hopeful expectation, and so blue has become an option for paraments (hangings) and candles to distinguish Advent from Lent. That being said, during Advent the readings from the prophets do get pretty intense, and we still hear John the Baptist preaching repentance. So on this third Sunday we are given a reprieve, we allow ourselves to experience the joy of anticipation, and we do some rejoicing. Some churches began using a pink candle on the third Sunday of Advent to remind us to rejoice, to be filled with expectation! As with most things liturgical, however, there is not consensus here – some of you may have heard other explanations about the candles, which illustrates for us that the Church does, in fact, change its traditions and liturgy from time to time. In the end, it's helpful to know that the Advent wreath has only been used in church since the mid 1800's – Jesus did not tell us we needed one, or what color the candles should be!

This third Sunday of Advent is referred to as Gaudete Sunday because the Latin word *gaudete* means “rejoice” and, if you noticed, in our first reading the prophet Zephaniah tells Israel to sing aloud, shout, rejoice and exult! Then Paul says to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!”

And then along comes John, who would appear to make a path straight out of the wilderness to throw a bucket of cold water on all our rejoicing! What should we do? Zephaniah is rejoicing at the coming of the Lord but John? No. He calls the crowd a brood of vipers; he speaks of chopping down trees, winnowing forks, and unquenchable fire!

John doesn't seem to think that the coming of the Lord is going to be only about singing and joy. He expects some changes, some transformation, some newness of life. John warns the people to prepare the way by repenting, by showing that there is some visible fruit, some evidence of change. He then goes so far as to give the crowd some concrete instructions on what the fruits worthy of repentance might look like.

John doesn't tell the people to get back to church, or what color candles to place in their Advent wreaths. He doesn't tell them to overthrow the Roman government, or to transform the world in some sudden, drastic revolution. No, he tells them the same things that parents and teachers tell children everywhere: share, care, and be fair. It seems so obvious. But the fact that John began by calling the entire crowd a brood of vipers suggests that every one of them needed to be reminded about what is truly important; that every one of them was in need of some self-examination and repentance.

I wonder if all those people who streamed out to be baptized by John were hurting? Certainly, they were oppressed by the Roman government. They struggled to have the basics of life such as food and shelter and meaningful work to make ends meet. But I'm guessing they also had heartaches from bad marriages, or they feared growing old alone, or they struggled with all the changes happening in the world around them. They were hurting so much so that they were willing to trek out into the wilderness to hear John, son of Zechariah, the crazy prophet without a pastoral bone in his body! And they were not at all intimidated – they were filled with expectation! Gathered there as a community in need, they were hungry for the truth, and something inside of them recognized truth when they heard it. The truth is that we are all predisposed to be a brood of vipers from time to time, all in need of repentance, and all in need of being reminded what repentance looks like. Aren't we all in need of a community where we can help one another through all the ups and downs of life?

And so we might ask ourselves the same thing the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers asked John. "What then should we do?" Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. Do not extort money from anyone and be satisfied with your wages. Share, care, and be fair. The amazing thing is that those in the crowd who heard John that day were not offended; they were blessed. To them it sounded like Good News! And my guess is that they went away rejoicing!

And here's one more bit of good news worth rejoicing about. God has given us this community of faith where we can worship, care for one another, and learn together what it means to follow Jesus. It's the one place in all the changes and chances of this life where we can know that we are welcomed and loved.

John the Baptizer wakes us up with his message, so that we will be ready for the coming of Christ, so that our hearts will be prepared to receive God's most precious gift. So, you brood of vipers, don't get too comfortable, don't let things like Advent candles or the endless details of shopping, wrapping and baking distract you. Remember that there are those around us who are hurting for all sorts of reasons. What then shall we do?

Share, care, and be fair. Because our long expected Jesus will be here soon. Amen.