

Zephaniah 3:14-20

A Song of Joy

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to

say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe 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.’

10 And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ ¹¹In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’

¹²Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’

¹³He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people

Testify to Liberating Love

We are currently in week 4 of extended Advent and week 3 of our extended Advent worship series, *Testify to Love*. Two weeks ago we spoke of testifying to righteousness, which is the righteousness of God that cleanses us of our sin in Jesus Christ, and last week we spoke of testifying to unfettered love, love that is of such magnitude that we give ourselves fully to God just as God gives himself fully to us. Today we will talk about *testifying to **liberating** love*.

And the natural question we have is, “What does God’s love **liberate** us from?”

To answer that, let’s look at the Gospel lesson. Imagine this crowd of people, very religious people, who are coming to see John the Baptist. First of all, he wasn’t conveniently located; He was out in the wilderness, and if you wanted to go to him it was a good hike. And maybe you’re going to him because you’ve heard of this wild-looking guy who is doing something new. Perhaps you’re bored with your old church or the old religion and you’ve heard that this guy offers something new. And after this long, long hike to get to his church (I call it a church because even though it’s outdoors it involves preaching and prayer and sacrament), and as you get within earshot of John’s pulpit you hear him address you and everyone else as “a brood of vipers,” and you hear him telling you to repent or face the wrath of God.” Now be honest: how many of you would stick around? Maybe you would hang around and hear what he had to say, but would you consent to being baptized? And even if you were baptized, would you repent or would you just get baptized because everyone else is being baptized? Finally, would you transfer your membership over to John’s church, or would you go back to your old congregation even if it is a bit boring and dry?

The truth is that we don’t like to be called vipers, or snakes or even *reptiles*. It’s an insult to our moral integrity, and we would consider anyone who calls us “vipers” to be too judgmental. And

this is where we should ask that question again; *what does God's love liberate us from?* Well one thing it liberates us from is the kind of pride that would cause us to walk away from John the Baptist and his Baptism of Repentance. Because as long as we are not interested in acknowledging our 'viperness' we're not that interested in repenting. **Pride** is the sin extraordinaire. We're okay with criticizing ourselves, but we sure don't want to hear criticism from others. We're okay with admitting our faults, but it's too extreme to consider ourselves as reptilian, as depraved or crooked. John's audience was good Jews after all. They had studied and obeyed the Law; that made them a good people. We're the same way; we know the golden rule, we treat others kindly for the most part, and we are very polite people. We don't like to think of ourselves as vipers. We want a church where we can basically hang around with decent people and feel good about ourselves, not one where the pastor hurls insults at us and dunks us into a river. We want a church where our pride can be preserved so we can feel good about ourselves and better than a lot of other people. We want a sermon that extols our virtues and doesn't offend us. And so we must ask ourselves, *Do we really want to change? Do we want to surrender our pride? Or put another way, **do we want to be liberated by God?***

If you remember the message from two weeks ago, I mentioned that *through Christ, God's righteousness becomes our righteousness*. However nice a person you happen to be, you're far from all-right by God's standards. As our communion liturgy goes, God created us to love and be loved, *but our love failed. God's love did not*. The question we must ask ourselves is, "Are we ready to head down that road that leads us to perfection, to be re-cast into the image of God, and that journey begins with repentance.

Just a quick observation; it may be easier for some criminal, some scoundrel, to repent than it is for someone who has grown up following all the rules. C.S. Lewis made that observation in his book *Mere Christianity*. Jesus makes that observation in the book of Luke (18:9-14) when at the Temple a Pharisee thanks God that he's not like all those riff raff, for being above such a person. A religious, practicing Jew or Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu can feel good about themselves, but the danger is always in feeling better than others. The criminal or the tax collector is more apt to recognize his own need for redemption and thus repent. The Pharisee suffered from pride and wanted to take credit for all his goodness while the tax-collector just confessed that he was a mess, that he was a viper. He would have responded to the message of John the Baptist while the Pharisee would not have.

We can rejoice when our hearts are indeed changed. Hear what the "brood of vipers" who responded to John's call asked him: "What then should we do?" Now here I think John's response is a bit disappointing; he tells people not to keep more than they need, not to take advantage of other people...and it seems to me that he's simply giving them some more laws to follow. If I were one of his followers I might be a bit discouraged by his answer. I might say, "I already have enough laws to keep me in line, thank you very much." And Laws are not exactly liberating – in fact they can feel a bit confining.

And so, perhaps in an effort not to leave his audience in a lurch John says, "Someone greater than me is coming, and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." And this really

gets to the issue of liberation. This gets to the crux of the matter: **Jesus brings something new, namely the Holy Spirit.**

And this Holy Spirit really is something radically new. We could observe the Law, or most of the Laws and feel alright about ourselves. We could believe in some doctrine and attend a church and feel pretty good about ourselves. **But Christianity is (or at least should be) so much more than law or doctrine. Christianity is liberating in the sense that it FREES US TO BE PROACTIVE. Doctrine is static – it is what it is. Law is dead – it’s a catalogue of what’s okay and not okay. BUT doctrine and Law do not free us to move and act, or as I like to put it, TO DANCE WITH GOD. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God himself, and a Christian is one who acts as an agent of God in this world.**

Christians who are focused on doctrine or laws are like pedestrians at a crime scene; they don’t cross the yellow tape; they may look to see what’s happening on the other side, but they’re afraid to get involved. Christians who are spirit-led are the ones working the crime scene, gathering evidence or making the area safe or whatever. I realize that’s rather negative metaphor, so here’s another one: Christians who are all about doctrine or law are like the audience at a concert, restricted from going on stage. Spirit-led Christians are the performers. They’re the ones on the stage doing the acting. And it’s all because we have this very dynamic relationship with God. You can’t have a relationship with a law or a doctrine. But you can with God, and when you have a relationship with God you go on dates, you do things together. You walk in Jesus’ footsteps, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and (very importantly) sharing the good news of God’s redemptive acts through Jesus Christ. You recruit more actors, more performers who also get up on the world stage and do what they can to bring the Kingdom of God to this world.

Testifying to liberating love means testifying to the Holy Spirit working in you, and that Spirit comes to you when you welcome the Spirit to come to you, when you can humbly confess that God would be much better at managing your life than you are at managing it. Testifying to liberating love means being led by the Holy Spirit, being an actor on the world stage, being a participant in God’s great plan for this world. Amen.