

It's interesting to compare the three readings for today, the third Sunday of Advent. In Zephaniah, the Old Testament reading, the prophet tells Israel that salvation is at hand, so rejoice! When we move to the New Testament epistle reading, from Philippians, the message is the same. Relax, don't be anxious, because salvation is at hand. To this end we are all set for the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of rejoicing, traditionally called *Gaudete* Sunday, which means "Rejoicing Sunday" in Latin. This was the Sunday to break away from any fasting when we really pushed Advent as a penitential season, like Lent. The Old Testament reading and the Epistle readings tell us to be happy, relaxed and joyful because God, in Christ, has forgiven us. He has set our sins aside and we are a new people, an accepted people, and judgment has been taken away.

Now, it seems logical that the Gospel for today would continue this theme, especially since we really prefer this theme to its flip side, the threat of damnation. But now we find ourselves right back with John the Baptist, at his caustic, in-your-face best: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Even now, John tells us, the grim reaper is ready to lay the axe to our roots if we are not living the way we ought to! How do we reconcile these themes? I think with the shift that we are seeing in how we understand Advent, at least in the liturgical protestant churches, the next revision of the lectionary will bring changes in the Advent readings. Until that happens, integrity insists that we grapple with these two themes, joyful anticipation balanced against the dread of facing a judging Christ. Where do we stand? How will we be come out in the greatest courtroom of all, that of Christ the King? I think it is a very real question for all of us, and we should not blow it off.

We must remember that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed a two-edged sword. The Lord's sword cuts both ways. The Gospel both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. There are times when we are so burdened with the weight of life that we are terribly afraid that God will punish us even though we have tried our best to be without guile. If these moments overwhelm us, we need to just let go and let God envelop us in his peace. This is an appropriate waiting for Jesus and, in doing this, we are as much preparing for God as when we turn a search light on to explore the depths of our consciences and come to grips with the evil within. But, there are times in all our lives when we must turn on that searchlight and come to grips with the inner darkness that keeps our Lord at bay. What is troubling is when a person's heart is so hardened and his soul is so darkened that the Gospel of love cannot bring in the light of Christ. When this happens, people often, incredibly, amazingly and tragically, seek to cover themselves in false religion and false piety. They look for cover in religion, proof text Scripture to find support for their hatred, and refuse to understand that our Lord's summary of the Law, to love God and neighbor, applies to them. I cannot imagine that God is pleased with people that claim to be Christians yet use Holy Scripture to justify their hate. The time is short, John the Baptist tells us. The axe is laid to the root of the tree. No fruit of the spirit? The tree is coming down.

The gospel reading for today tells us that it is Advent is a time to get ready to meet Jesus and to stand before his throne. If we are ready, Advent is time to rejoice, for God is near. Jesus has won the day. The battle is over. We are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb of God. If we are not ready, we need to remember that the sword has two edges and the time for repentance is now. *Amen.*