

It is good to be back with you, even though we gather online. Last week, Pastor John compared the circumstances in which we presently live to a wilderness experience. I will be honest with you, I deeply feel that wilderness experience, and so I **need** to hear the word God gives us on this day because I have been discouraged. I have been discouraged by living with four weeks of illness, by struggling with Covid-19, by the cavalier and careless attitude people are taking toward this deadly virus, and by the lack of respect, love, and care for neighbor exhibited by far too many. I have also been **deeply** distraught by the horrific killing that took place at Oxford High School less than two weeks ago. And then, when only days later, some elected leaders posted **Christmas** messages with pictures showing each member of their family, some children, holding a gun, we saw how deeply the **idolatry** of gun worship is infecting our culture. **Our nation's worship of guns is dangerous and wrong!** Yes, I desperately need to hear the word God gives us on this day.

Richard Rohr writes, “**The word of God confronts, converts, and consoles us – in that order.**” In today’s readings, God’s word comes to us and does just that, it **confronts, converts, and consoles**. From the prophet Zephaniah, we hear: “Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O

daughter Jerusalem!” However, prior to today’s passage, Zephaniah has just confronted and condemned Israelite **idolatry** and society’s oppression of the poor. Zephaniah told the people that God has commanded obedience to the covenant, and God will punish offenders. Then, after that **confrontation** and call for **conversion**, a call for people to change their ways, the prophet **consolingly** sings about God’s promised salvation. Zephaniah says that as people return to the covenant, God stands inside the city, enlivens it, and **rejoices** over God’s people. Oh yes, I need to hear this word from God right now on this third Sunday of Advent.

In today’s gospel reading, we hear of John the Baptist and, quite honestly, he seems to be quite crabby. I understand his mood because I have been feeling rather crabby. In his unique way, John is **confronting** the people and calling them to **convert**, to turn around and change their behavior. And, like the people in his time, **we** need to hear the words of John the Baptist, words of one who will speak prophetically and clearly in **this** wilderness in which **we** are presently living. We need a John the Baptist who will warn us that judgement is at hand, that God will not tolerate the violence that seems to have become normal, everyday violence in our culture. We need a John the Baptist who will tell us, “The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” We need one who will name the sins that

pervade our relationships and our communities, and name the injustices that permeate our broken world. And, we need a John the Baptist who calls us to **change**, one who points us to the path God has set before us.

As the crowds hear John speak, they wonder how they should respond. So, John tells them what worthy response looks like. He speaks of the **fruit** that comes from a **changed heart**. He tells them to **love** their neighbors! Give them your coat, your food. He calls them to live out acts of grace, mercy, and love. An encounter with the grace, mercy and love of God brings **consolation** and **comfort** into our lives. And, a changed life then **lives** out the grace and mercy one has received as one shares that grace and mercy with others who are in pain. It is interesting that even the despicable tax collectors want to change their ways. They come asking the question, “What should we do?” We might expect John to instruct these servants of Roman power to get new jobs helping those in need, to stop serving their imperial masters and instead love the neighbors they previously had taken advantage of. No, instead, John calls them to be **good** tax collectors, to collect only that which is required of them. And, then the soldiers come asking, “What should we do?” We might expect John to instruct these soldiers to lay aside their instruments of violence and embrace a way of peace. Instead, John tells them to **not** use their position

of power to steal life or livelihood from **anyone**. Be **good** soldiers, he demands of them. He calls them to live lives of grace and mercy.

So, what might John the Baptist say to each one of us today, in the wake of the shooting at Oxford High School, in the wake of the violence and hatred that seems to permeate our daily lives? Quite honestly, I don't think he would show **any** restraint. He would **name** what is wrong and harmful. He would name the way we are idolizing guns and violence. He would name the way we are damaging God's good creation. He would name the racism, sexism and xenophobia that is so present in our society. He would name our lack of care and love for neighbor. He would say, "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." He would say we are being judged by a God whose heart **yearns** for justice and mercy. He would call us to **change**, to **convert**, to turn around, and he would call us back to the way of God's love, mercy, grace, and peace. He would then give us words of consolation and **comfort** as he would call us to live out love and care for our neighbor and live out ordinary acts of grace, mercy, and love. He would call us to give away some of what we have. And, he would call us to the radical idea that our ordinary lives can be filled and permeated with the extraordinary Spirit of God that transforms the world.

True and lasting change, the change John calls us to make, engages both interior awareness and exterior action; it harmonizes inner change of heart and outer change which creates right relationships. John challenges us to act with more **compassion**. You see, changing our patterns of conduct can lead us to discover our blind spots, our idolatry, our prejudices, and our self-defeating thinking. While this may make us feel vulnerable, it also enables our hearts, our state of mind, our body, and our spirit to be open to the Holy Spirit. When God's Spirit shows up in us, we find a new openness to others, new generosity, and new life-giving energy. The Spirit of God changes our hearts so we can then be **more** compassionate and truly **love** others. These are the **fruits** John calls changed people to bear.

Paul also speaks to the fruits we bear when our hearts and lives become changed. He writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice!" In other writings he says, "Let your fairness, your kindness, your gentleness, your unselfishness, your inner peace – let these qualities be known to **all** human beings." Paul, like John, is clear about **who** is the source and the power behind any genuine transformation. But, unlike John's vision of fire that brings judgment and destruction, Paul sees the fire of the Holy Spirit as the spiritual energy that **inspires** people toward greater generosity and the passion to persevere. Paul's words temper

John's somewhat crabby way of speaking when he says, "Rejoice and bear fruits worthy of a transformed heart because **Christ is near.**" This is the path to the divine peace that surpasses all human awareness; the peace that keeps watch over our hearts and minds. Paul's guidance to **not** worry does not mean for us to be superficially cheerful or to pretend that nothing disturbs us. Distress and concerns and grief **will** continue to be part of our human experience. Paul **is** reminding us that God is **always** present to us. He calls us to connect the nearness of God, to **everything** that we experience – everything that frustrates, or saddens, or discourages us; everything that delights us or astonishes us; everything that puzzles or embarrasses us, lifts us up or makes us impatient. We can practice giving **all** our life experiences to God in prayer simply because God is so **near** to us. In all things, the nearness of the God of hope and peace enables us to become aware that we are **always** bathed in God's loving presence. Inspired, changed, consoled, and comforted by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do what John calls us to, things like loving our neighbor, or sharing with someone who has less or none of what we have. We can use our gifts to work for justice and mercy for **all** people. So, on this day, hear God's Word – be confronted, be converted, be consoled. Bear the **good** fruit of a changed life, live out God's love. And, **rejoice** because God is truly near!