

**SERMON: 2018/12/16 (3rd Sunday of Advent, Yr. C - Track 1) -
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; and, Luke
3:7-18_BTR**

[Invite children to the front. Have to hand a box of (long-reach) matches and a long coil of rope.]

In our gospel reading today, we meet one of Jesus' closest friends - *His cousin(!)*, in fact - someone whose message was *almost* identical: and that is, "John the Baptist."

Now, John the Baptist lived out in the desert of Judea, and he would spend every day standing up to his waist in the River Jordan - which was a sensible thing to do since it was so *hot(!)* - and he would invite other people to join him in the waters and immersed 'for the forgiveness of [their] sins'. [Mk. 1:4]

But some of those watching made fun of him: they called him names!

Has that ever happened to you?

[Wait for response.]

Yes? So you can sympathise!

Poor John!

But do you know what he did?

He stood up for himself.

He didn't let them just bully him.

He said to the: "You are snakes." [Lk. 3:7]

Snakes!

And he warned them: he warned them that God, one day, will bring punishment to everything that is bad in the world, and that includes us.

He told them that there will be a time when God will send 'unquenchable fire' on the earth, to *purify* it: [v.17].

What does that mean, exactly?

Well, consider a match.

[Light match.]

What happens when you light a match is that, at the top, there is a *brilliant(!)* chemical reaction - *Whoosh!* - which transforms the "(colourful) head" of the match into wonderful light and heat.

But what happens to the rest?

[Wait for response.]

Right! It is blackened and charred.

Ugly.

It becomes *ash*.

The question, then, that John the Baptist poses to us, is: "What part of the match am I?"

Am I the bit (at the top) that becomes beautiful or the bit that's left behind and thrown away?

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' [Pause.]

What causes *you* anxiety?

What makes you fret and be nervous?

What issues wake you at 2am and keep you from a restful night's sleep?

Unless you are the "guest" of an asylum for the insane, likely there are matters in your life and in the lives of those that you love, which upset your... "equilibrium."

And, let's be honest, there are things in the Headlines that any reasonable person is concerned about: there's so-called "Global Warming," the looming government shut-down, Brexit, the Saudi's bombing of civilians in Yemen, the attacks of jihadists against shoppers frequenting Christmas markets in Europe.

The list is long and nauseating.

Closer to home, in this special, upcoming season, we worry about whether the honey-roast ham is properly cooked; whether the unpasteurized eggs in the Eggnog will give my dinner-guests diarrhoea; and if great aunt Gladys will drink too much sherry again and fall down the stairs to the basement looking for the restroom.

These worries can ruin "The Big Day."

And our worries generally can spoil the joy that God desires we experience in His creation, when it is rightly ordered - the joy that the prophet Zephaniah speaks about in the Old Testament.

'*Sing!*' He says.

'*[S]hout!*'

'[E]xult'.

And most of all, 'do not fear'.

But why wouldn't we?

Will I be able to pay my mortgage next year?

Will I be made redundant?

Will that colleague I despise get the promotion I've worked so hard for?

Will my children succeed?

Will they find lasting love?

Will my spouse be faithful?

Similarly, Paul's words to the Philippian Christians, therefore, of '[d]o not worry' sound like madness!

An almost callous platitude - a nonsensical one.

And he was, of course, only echoing Jesus Christ Himself: in the "Sermon on the Mount," our Savior makes the very same remark - chapter six, verse twenty-five - 'do not worry', He says, 'about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, ... about your body, what you will wear. [Etcetera, etcetera]'

It is hearing impractical sentiments like these that have led some to conclude that religion is a waste of time - a hobby only for the comfortable and the well-off.

An extra-curricular activity for deluded people looking to escape the *real* world and its problems;

a fantasy-land of unicorns and wishful thinking.

But they're wrong.

Jesus knew what it was like to have carefully "laid" plans thwarted; for them to come unravelled. In His own *earthly* ministry, of course, there was only really one important "milestone," which was to offer Himself as an atoning sacrifice for the 'sins of the whole world', and, yes, in that He was supremely successful: it is for this reason that we hear Paul saying, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I...say, rejoice.' [Phil. 4:4]

But, repeatedly, *before* His Incarnation (in the stable in Bethlehem), when He existed 'with God' [Jn. 1:1] - when He "dwelt" 'in unapproachable light' in Heaven [1 Tim. 6:16] - He saw His hopes and dreams for the People of the Old Covenant - for Israel - come apart.

He *knew* frustration as well as any one of us, which is why, in *Matthew* [23:37], He says: "'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ...'"

This can be the only meaning of this text.

And often His worldly, *bodily* needs weren't met either: "the Son of Man has

nowhere to lay his head." He complained: [Mt. 8:20].

But such *legitimate* concerns never consumed Him; and they didn't the Apostle either.

And this is because they saw such things from the perspective of men who took seriously the promises of God - about everlasting life(-after-death) for His people - and had experienced their reality in the resurrection - Jesus personally; and Paul in a vision on the road to Damascus: [see: Acts 9:1-5].

Knowing, therefore - *convinced* - that life was merely transitory, and that human beings are, then, apparently, *immortal* creatures, the worries of the flesh *shrink* in their magnitude - even serious ones begin to seem trivial.

[Hold up the rope.]

Consider this rope: [Point to a small section, a few inches long] this is your *pre-Jesus-is-coming-back* existence; the Here and the Now.

The rest [throw the rope so that it uncoils], which goes on and on and on...that's everything else, hidden behind 'The Veil' [2 Cor. 3:16] - *beyond* the Judgment (on the Day of the Lord).

We're so relentlessly focussed on this, *very* short section - and it isn't to be disregarded or disparaged(!) - don't misunderstand me, but when you do "stand back" and "take in" the rope as a whole, the picture is dramatically changed.

Let's take a moment to reflect.