

3rd Sunday of Advent (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
December 12, 13, 2015

“Gray skies are gonna clear up, put on a happy face.
Brush off the clouds and cheer up, put on a happy face.
Take off that gloomy mask of tragedy, it's not your style
You'll look so good that you'll be glad you decided to smile
Pick out a pleasant outlook, stick out that noble chin
Wipe off that full of doubt look, slap on a happy grin
And spread sunshine all over the place
Just put on a happy face, put on a happy face.

Some of you will recognize these as song lyrics sung by some world famous singers including Tony Bennett. These came to my mind given this 3rd Sunday of Advent, lighting the pink or rose candle, me vested in a rose-colored vestment, and of course the Scriptures for today: *“Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!*

Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem....” (Zephaniah)

“Brothers and Sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again, rejoice!

Philippians

To be very honest with you, I have a hard time getting into the spirit of “Rejoice, rejoice always! I say it again, rejoice!” Just to put on a 'happy face', 'stick out a noble chin' or 'slap on a happy grin' seem to be gestures of denial. I have done that earlier in life and I have watched others be in denial. It gets you no where, at least for the long haul. I will admit that I have and can fall into a “Christmas funk” ..., but I think what I feel currently is more than what can be my customary 'gray mood' around this time of year.

I really want to believe as Zephaniah says, *“(the Lord) has turned away our enemies, and removed the judgment against me (us).”* I want to believe *“The Lord is near.”* as St. Paul reminds the Philippians. But the noise and craziness of the world, and all the negativity that fills the news of today, is drowning out what is needed to believe; it is drowning out what, at least for me, is needed to, as we heard from Philippians, actually *‘feel the peace of God that surpasses all understanding...’* (One sign of hope: 200 nations agreeing on climate change.)

So, the question repeated three times in today's gospel really caught my attention. The question, as you remember, is “What should I do?” The crowd of people asked this question of John the Baptist, as did the tax collectors and soldiers individually. It really is a good question for each of us to ask. What was happening in the gospel just prior to these questions being asked, and probably what actually led to these questions being asked is John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and then saying to the crowds coming out to be baptized:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And then the question of today began to be asked, “What should we do? What should we do?”

Interestingly, John the Baptist answers with challenges for action: share your coat, share your food, don't collect more tax from others than is due; don't extort, don't falsely accuse others, and be satisfied with your own wage. He does not challenge them to more prayer or even to go to the Temple or synagogue more frequently. That doesn't mean that prayer and going to church is unimportant, but it does mean that something beyond prayer is needed. This is also what John the Baptist meant Or, we saying, “I'm baptized, even confirmed> I got all my sacraments as if they are some collector's items. Being in the family is good, but it is not enough. Being on the Catholic list is good, but it is not enough. We need to be good Catholics. And good Catholics live for others, and not for themselves. How do you spend your time? What percentage of your time is spent looking after and taking care of yourself? What percentage of your time is given to others? To people beyond your own? We do lots of things for our families, but do we do anything with our families for those beyond our families? This is how *“mountains are made low, and valleys are filled in.”* This is how *“highways are made straight, and rough roads made smooth.”*

Getting beyond ourselves may raise interesting questions for you, and some good self-examination. For me, I began to wonder about the time I give to homily preparation. Do I spend the time I do preparing a homily because I want to proclaim the Word of God, or do I spend it so I have something I think will not be embarrassing to myself. There is a mighty difference between these two reasons: the first is for God and for you the other is to make me look good in your eyes.

So, what should I do? I think at least we must more frequently ask ourselves what kind of time we give to God and to the work of the Kingdom. We can also ask ourselves whether the time we do give is really about the Kingdom, or simply fulfilling obligations and/or Church rules. Do those who watch me, see mercy? Do those who watch me see justice? Do those who watch me see signs that God is with me, that indeed real fruit flowing from repentance is visible. What should I do? Make every effort to be a sign of the coming of God, especially now in the midst of a world that is noisy with violence and negative words. Our minds are conditioned by the fallen world! Our expectations are shaped, stunted by what has gone before! Repentance means going beyond the mind that we have now. John says, it is time for a new mind, a new set of eyes, a new kind of expectation.The days are coming. Our redemption is near at hand.