

Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

What is comfort food for you? Meatloaf? Macs and cheese? Chicken and noodles? Ice cream? For me, on Sunday nights, chicken wings with my own homemade blue cheese sauce is a special comfort food.

There are times when we treat the Bible as comfort food. I know that there are many devotional Bibles with indexes in the back linking individual verses to whatever emotion you might be feeling. We look for verses to read in order to calm our fears, or for reassurance when we are down or lonely, or when someone we know is sick and needs words of peace.

This is a fine way to use the Bible. But just like comfort food, a steady diet of individual verses keyed to make us comfortable – well, it may be filling, but it is not all that nutritious.

In this morning's Gospel, we come upon John the Baptizer out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. And what he has to say is not at all comfortable. In this morning's Gospel, John's words do not bring reassurance or ease of mind. They are challenging. They bring us truth that is difficult and disturbing.

“You brood of vipers!” is how he begins his sermon. Not exactly a comforting image. “Don't even begin to use Abraham as an excuse for how you act.” You can't claim the promise of Abraham without also living the faith of Abraham. Whoa, there. Who is John talking to? Crowds of people, we are told. Crowds of people who have come out to hear him and to be baptized, washed in the water of the Jordan river. Crowds that include tax collectors and soldiers. Tax collectors and soldiers were not exactly the most upright people in town. Tax collectors fleeced their own people, pocketed what they could, and

gave the proceeds to the Roman occupiers. Soldiers were mercenaries, paid muscle, who lined their own pockets with bribes. So when these people ask John the Baptizer what to do to live rightly, his answers have to do with economics.

John's world is our world. There is someone out there who doesn't have warm clothes or enough to eat. There is someone out there who is getting scammed. There is someone out there who has been falsely accused of a crime.

In this part of the country, if you don't have a car, you have a very hard time being a productive member of society. Think about living in a trailer on the edge of town. If you don't have a car, your kids have to walk to get to the primary building across the street here, or the intermediate building up in Kenwood. It's well over a mile from some of those places to school. And the school district doesn't provide transportation. So maybe on a cold morning, you just don't make it to school.

Or think about if your car were to break down outside of Hay Springs while you are driving back home to Las Vegas. It's going to cost several hundred dollars to get it fixed, money you don't have. The nearest town with any kind of bus service is Scottsbluff. Your choices are to hitchhike or...to walk. And there is snow in the forecast.

Think about having \$5 in your pocket and a job that starts tomorrow. But you won't get your first paycheck until next week. You have the choice of putting gas in the tank so that you can actually get to the job, or food in your stomach.

These are not made up stories. And they are not comfortable stories. We live in the wealthiest nation that has ever existed and yet right here in this town there are people who live these stories. Who live on the very edge of survival.

There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby Jesus in the manger without first hearing the uncomfortable words of John the Baptizer, that rough prophet out there in the wilderness. Prophets say what no one wants to hear. Prophets point out what no one wants to look at. Prophets call us to repentance, and that is exactly what John is doing. John's words call us to examine how we live individually and how we live within an economic system. John's words call us to examine our own hearts and to examine the structures that help some and hurt others.

John wanted to make sure that those who followed him were aware of the serious, and life-altering consequences of being baptized. He baptized with water. But the One who is coming baptizes with the searing flame of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is more than just a little water to wash you. Baptism gets inside you. It changes you. It enters your molecular structure and forms a new creation within you. Your life is different now than it was before. Or it should be.

“What should we do?” the crowds asked John. It's our question, too, and the answer is: Live as if your life mattered to God, because it does.

The mark of your baptism is that cross that was traced on your forehead. The mark of your baptism is how you live – in right relationship with God and with your neighbors. We hear John's instructions: No hoarding. No skimming. No extortion. Share. Be fair. Don't bully. Treat other people with care.

We have lit three candles this morning. The third candle, the rose-colored one, is the candle of joy. And all of the first lessons we read this morning, from Zephaniah and Isaiah and Philippians, were full of rejoicing, full of thanksgiving for what God has done and is doing. John the Baptist and his call to repent seem to stand in stark contrast to all

the joy of the other readings. How do you rejoice to know that the unproductive tree will be cut down? How do you rejoice to know that the chaff will be thrown into the fire?

Can we hear John's words this morning with joy?

The answer is, Yes we can. But you need to stop trying to figure out which side you are on. Stop with the anxiety. Stop trying to purchase your salvation with good deeds, and let the grace of God rain down on you. Stop trying to purchase a merry Christmas and let the uncomfortable story of a preacher in the wilderness fill your life.

Let the story that began with your baptism bear good fruit in you. Let the story that began with your baptism separate the wheat from the chaff within you. The good news is this: you don't change your life in order to be saved. You change your life *because* you are saved. Repentance literally means turning around and walking in a new direction. With joy in your heart, because you know that with God all things are possible.

This year in particular, the news of violence and conflict and war is hitting us hard. This year in particular we long to hear the angels' song about peace on earth and goodwill to all mankind. This year in particular we long to hear the promise that god will make all things new. And this is not an empty promise – but it also means that God is making something new out of you.

So let yourself enter fully into these final days of longing and expectation. Let yourself experience fully the joy of waiting for the coming dawn.

And let yourself enter into the discomfort as well, of knowing that because of sin, the world is not what God intended it to be. Let that discomfort move you to repentance. Let that discomfort move you to action. Prophets say things that no one wants to hear. Prophets point in directions that no one wants to look. We read this story this morning,

not to be comforted, not to be reassured, but to be awakened. We read this story this morning with expectation, knowing that Christ is surely coming. We read this story this morning with joy, knowing that God is already here, God with us.

O Come, O Come Immanuel.