

Sermon for Advent 3 Year C

[RCL] Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Rejoice and Seek

“The rural quiet you encounter at Mepkin Abbey is a *thingish presence*, the texture of all that can be experienced. To pass through the gates is to move into ‘another intensity,’ a spreading flatland park of live oaks that dips suddenly into the waters of the Cooper [River], which run beside it for three miles: imperceptible in its flow and impenetrable at its surface.”¹ These are the images Dr. Frank Lentricchia uses to describe the Trappist Monastery Mepkin Abbey near Charleston, South Carolina. The contemplative monk, Thomas Merton, visited Mepkin. Many seek this place today for a deeper encounter with God. It is an enchantingly sacred wilderness.

John the Baptizer is in the wilderness by the Jordan River, “imperceptible in its flow and impenetrable at its surface,” preaching repentance and baptism. John’s words to the crowd are harsh, rather uninviting, and somber rather than joyful. “You brood of vipers! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree.” (Luke 3:7ff) Theologian Joseph Fitzmyer said, “John’s words are a warning against their smugness of salvation, which is their undoing.”² This is the poison or venom in their destructive behavior.

John’s images are the opposite of what many expect to hear for Rose Sunday on the Third Sunday in Advent. This is traditionally is Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin, “Rejoice!” taken from Philippians 4:4. John the Baptizer in Luke 3 sounds more like he is raging and not rejoicing. John is raging in order to punctuate the importance of his message of repentance, the importance of seeking and returning to God. John baptizes with water. The Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John preaches that Jesus’ baptism will have the two-fold benefit of purification and refinement. Repentance in John’s mind resembles the actions in Luke 3:11: share your coat, do not overcharge, do not extort money, and do not bring threats or false accusations. In other words, do share but do not swindle, strong-arm, or support scare-tactics. John’s words invite the crowd to examine their personal actions that stand in the way of a deeper relationship with God and humanity.

The African American artist Jonathan Green is one of American’s great painters. He has ties to the community near Mepkin Abbey. The head of the monastery commissioned Jonathan Green in 2006 to create a work of art honoring a newly discovered burial ground on the monastery’s property, holding the graves of Africans and African

¹ Ferraro, Thomas J. *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*. Frank Lentricchia. “Making it to Mepkin Abbey.” p. 110.

² Fitzmyer, Joseph, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX of The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 467.

Americans from the time during and after slavery. As Jonathan and Abbot Francis walked the grounds of this once rice plantation, Jonathan thought about his spiritual awakening growing up with the Gullah community off the Charleston, South Carolina coast. He reflected on his experience of “seeking,” the Gullah community’s process for preparing early adolescents for baptism. These adolescent “seekers” entered the wilderness for a week as part of their rite of passage. Seekers took a vow of silence, only speaking with a community elder during their wilderness experience. The seeker picked a tree in the forest where she or he went to meditate, pray, and meet the elder. Seekers could not kill any insect or perform any “worldly” task during this period of fasting and prayer. After a week, the seeker re-entered the community, telling those gathered about a transforming encounter with God. After meeting the approval of the community, the adolescent entered baptism at a time in the near future. As a teenager, Jonathan, walking in a similar path of his ancestors, made his way to living waters wearing “regular clothes.” Immediately after his baptism, a group shuffled the newly baptized from the congregation’s sight. They returned wearing shiny white robes; symbolizing leaving behind a “regular life” while embracing a new life in Jesus Christ. One observer noted, “There was a great difference in their looks when they came into the church the second time.”

John the Baptizer invites all who seek a deeper relationship with God to examine what stands in the way of that relationship. Perhaps the joy or rejoicing in John the Baptizer’s rhetoric is that our present condition does not have to be our future reality. John admonishes the crowd not to rely on their status or smugness of salvation but to repent. Repentance is sharing, being honest, and exhorting or encouraging others in John’s eyes. Consider thinking about repentance as meaning, “to look anew.” What does it mean to look anew at life? The Trappist monks at Mepkin looked anew at a once abandoned rice plantation to see a monastery of prayer and worship. The artist Jonathan Green visited that monastery to look anew at a “spreading flatland park of live oaks” to create a breathtaking painting pulling together his encounter of “seeking” Jesus Christ with the voices from the African cemetery. Listen to God’s call to examine our lives. John’s delivery is deafening. His message is clear. Be open to God’s Spirit of transformation and await the coming of Jesus Christ.

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