

Well, Christmas is in 12 days. Make you a little anxious? Most of us experience some anxiety about this season...remembering Christmases past, expectations and hopes for Christmases future. And for many of us there is just so much to do before Christmas.

I am not going to stand here and tell you that you should stop doing everything you are doing in preparation for Christmas and just study your Bible quietly instead. First of all it isn't practical, or realistic. After all, it wouldn't be Advent without all the worrying about Christmas, would it? Well, John the Baptist may have something to tell us about all this that is both practical and realistic.

But before we get to John, first of all I'd like us to think about the other prophets we heard from this morning.

It used to be that scholars talked about "the prophetic point of view" as if there was only one way to be a prophet. But then as Biblical experts spent more time studying each prophet in the Hebrew Scripture they realized that the prophets often had very different points of view. Each prophetic book has it's own social perspective and historical reality. But by the same token there are things that are similar about many of the prophets and their writings.

The prophets we hear from today lived at different times, spoke to different sorts of people, and had different messages. But in most cases they were equally not well received.

In ancient days kings normally surrounded themselves with a retinue of prophets. These were advisors who told them when it was a good time to go to war, when a drought might begin or end, and to advise the King on a number of other issues. True prophets, on the other hand, were by and large unpopular, because they did not tell the kings and court priests what they wanted to hear, but instead, what God told them. Most of them found themselves on the outs with the king; banished or jailed or killed.

Here is what a prophet's job description entails. I don't think it pays very well though. See if you think you'd like to apply for the position.

First of all, as I just was saying, you almost **have** to be unpopular to be a good prophet. No prophet who just tells you what you want to hear is a true prophet. Next, a good prophet has to be an accurate predictor of future events. True prophets preached that people must change behavior or else something very bad would happen. These were called judgment oracles. Mostly this morning though, we have heard less about judgment and more about promise. The one we hear from Zephaniah this morning is a promise of better days to come. But the first 2 and ½ chapters of the Prophecy of Zephaniah are spent in condemnation and judgment. He wrote his book somewhere around the time of the Babylonian exile, he accurately predicts that the city will be brought down because of its sinfulness. But then, like others of his time, he predicts that there will be a remnant of people who will eventually be able to return to Jerusalem, much like Malachi who we heard last week.

There will be a few who will return to Jerusalem, and their fortunes will be restored, Zephaniah says. It's notable that with all the prophets, their oracles of judgment did come to pass (and that is probably why their books were included in our Canon of Scripture) but that the oracles of promise did not necessarily occur as predicted. The Jerusalem after the return of the "righteous remnant" did not look anything like the Jerusalem prior to the exile in Babylon. There has never a restoration of the independent Jewish Kingdom in Palestine such as Zephaniah prophesies. But, because this and other promise oracles looks forward, they can continue to look forward with promise indefinitely. These hopeful oracles remind the people that God is with them even now. One day, perhaps the rest of this promise will come to pass.

The prophet Isaiah also promises in our canticle this morning that God is with God's people; "for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel." And yet, at the same time, we still wait expectantly. Christ has come and Christ will come.

Now, Paul has never been considered a prophet in the true sense. He calls himself, and is called by others, an apostle of Christ. But, another major characteristic of a prophet is that they interpret God's words and actions in the world. Paul certainly does that. Today we hear from his letter to the people in Philippi. He had set up yet another church in this famous Roman city found in present day northern Greece. It was a city 10 miles from the coast. Paul clearly loved the people there. But he also told them what God wanted them to be and do. Rejoice, pray, be gentle and do not worry. He tells the people that the peace of God WILL guard your hearts. Interesting! The original Greek word used in the original text is "phru-rései" which is the future tense of "to guard". That's slightly different than the version we hear most Sundays when I say at the blessing, The peace of God which passes all understanding KEEP your hearts and minds, etc.. It may seem a very small difference, but somehow, Paul's version as it is in the reading today seems more like a promise oracle, doesn't it?

And now we come to John. John is considered to be the last true prophet. I think there are a number of people who are good candidates for the position of modern-day prophet, but time has to pass before wise and faithful people can make those calls.

John has all the classic characteristics of a true prophet. He is prickly. Not the kind of guy a king, or governor, would want on staff, to tell him he's doing a great job. He predicts the future and tells who Jesus is and when he will come. He interprets God's words for us and when the people ask "What then should we do?", John knows. John knows unequivocally what we should do.

John the Baptist has an easy to follow three step plan for us this Advent season. I'm no prophet, but I predict that if we want to encounter Jesus the Christ this Christmas we might want to give this a try:

ONE: Go out into the wilderness. That is where John heard God and that is where he encouraged the people of Jerusalem to come to be baptized. I know, we're busy with all our "to-do" lists, and I said we should embrace busy-ness as part of the season. But John would encourage us to take some time to pray in a quiet place, in our own wilderness, wherever that may be, with or without lists in hand.

TWO: In your prayer ask to be open; open to repentance and change, and open with watchful awareness. Remember that even if we have Abraham as our ancestor there is no reason that we should believe that God loves us better than anyone else. You and I are just as likely to make mistakes as anyone else. John says we need to acknowledge that we have made mistakes, and that we wish to be open to change in the future.

THREE: Do something while you are waiting for Christ to come – John the Baptist has very specific suggestions to all the people who come to him. "What should we do?", they ask. Share a coat, he says. Don't overcharge people if you deal with money. Don't take advantage of people if you are in a position of power. These are very specific recommendations that we can follow.

John uses the image of the wheat and the chaff. In a farming society that analogy made a lot of sense. Here and now in our day you may have to use some imagination on this one. I have an example that may help. I visited and worked a little with people who were harvesting coffee in Honduras last year. It's a very similar process to what you do with any sort of grain crop. You gather and dry the seeds. You pound the seeds. When you pound wheat or coffee, it loosens the shell that encases the grain. Many families in the Honduran mountains had their own small coffee field next to their home and their own little concrete slab on which to spread and dry the coffee. I helped Bianca pound the coffee her husband had picked and dried, in a very large wooden mortar with a big wooden pestle. I asked her, "What's the next step?" What sort of tool would she use I wondered, to separate the coffee from the coffee shells. She took a bowl of the pounded coffee and stood out in the breezy area in front of her porch

and picked up handfuls of the coffee and let them stream from her hand. The seed coats or chaff blew away in the wind and the coffee, which was much heavier fell back into the bowl. I smiled at Bianca and she smiled back at me. What a simple, low tech, but perfectly functional method. It was actually the children in the family that sat and did that sort of work. Everyone had to pitch in at coffee harvest time.

What is in us is both wheat and chaff, the good and the bad. The wheat is much heavier than the chaff. We have so much good within us. But the chaff is sometimes tightly wrapped around our core. We have to do something intentional to loosen that chaff. John's three steps give us just the right things to do. Go to the wilderness. Pray for openness. Do something for someone. What a simple thing it is to simply let the chaff blow away in the wind of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is coming. I for one will follow John's steps to make myself ready for Jesus. Will you join me?