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St. John the Baptist is depicted in mosaic in the Baptistery of St. John in Florence, Italy. (Wikimedia Commons/Sailko)



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December 15, 2018

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Third Sunday of Advent

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Zephaniah 3:14-18a

Isaiah 12

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

I wonder if Luke had tongue in cheek when he wrote the conclusion to his description of John the Baptist. Luke recounts John's less-than-diplomatic practice of calling his audience a bunch of snakes and his allegation that they were no more pious than a pile of rocks. He tells us that John demanded that people empty their closets for the poor and quit their most lucrative and self-aggrandizing practices. He went on to tell them that the world was about to be judged by its maker. Luke closes that extraordinary scene saying that all this was typical of how John preached the "good news."

From Luke's picture, it seems that although John made clear demands on everybody, the poor got the worst of it. John told them to give away every stitch of clothing they weren't wearing at the moment, along with any dessert they had saved for later. The others, tax collectors and soldiers, got away with being told to start being honest and stop acting like bullies. How was that good news?

Maybe John knew what he was doing. Perhaps he knew that the poor were used to the type of solidarity he demanded. Good people who themselves have known hunger will not allow anyone else to suffer it if they can help it. The same for the clothes. Destitute people understand the importance of feeling decent and keeping warm far better than anyone who has never wanted for a nice outfit. These demands might not have been as outrageous as they might sound. Perhaps John was praising the poor for who they were. He could have been pointing to them in their threadbare outfits and calling attention to how they broke, blessed and shared their bread. He might have been telling them to keep it up; he might have been calling them

blessed.



(Mark Bartholomew)

In that light, John's preaching actually begins to sound like the good news Jesus preached. John is describing what *metanoia* entails. *Metanoia* is repentance or conversion. It is an attitude that turns the world's values inside out. *Metanoia* is an approach to life that both hopes and works for the time when things will be as God created them to be. John was pointing out what that looks like in action.

This brings us to the message of this Sunday's combination of readings. Where John pointed to the sort of behavior that prepares the way for God's coming, Zephaniah proclaims that God is overjoyed to be in our midst. Zephaniah goes so far as to paint a picture of God partying with the people who have been saved.

Paul picks up on the theme by telling the Philippians that their life should be one of constant rejoicing. And why? Because the Lord is near, and there is nothing to fear.

This, of course, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe that we are standing on the threshold of the reign of God, we will put on our party clothes and realize that we have no reason to hold back on sharing, or strive for personal gain or exert our petty power.

If we believe that the reign of God is real and as near as our own hearts, we will become freer than we could ever have imagined. We will understand that we have nothing to lose in any relationship of love or solidarity. Then John's predictions of baptism by fire and the Lord's winnowing fan evoke images of a shared passion for justice and the cleanup in preparation for a feast of plenty, shared among all who want it. It is exciting rather than frightening.

On the Third Sunday of Advent, we as a church focus on our reasons for joy. The readings offer us multiple reasons to rejoice, all of which come down to two basic themes: God loves and saves us, and we are capable of loving one another with the freedom God's love engenders in us.

Let us meet John down by the river today. As we go there, we had better prepare ourselves. We need to arrive ready to ask what we should do now to prepare for God's presence among us. John, or whoever speaks for him, will not mince words. But the prophets will also point to examples of people from whom we can learn. When we see the joy in their lives, we just might get the courage to follow their example.

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Editor's note: *This Sunday Scripture commentary was originally published in the December 2018 issue of [Celebration](#), a comprehensive pastoral resource. To read the full version of the commentary, click [here](#). Sign up to receive [weekly Scripture for Life emails](#).*

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A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 30-Dec 13, 2018** print issue under the headline: Joy: metanoia in action.