

“The Splishing and Splashing of Salvation”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

December 12, 2021 – The Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18

“You brood of vipers!” How would you like it if I called you that here from this pulpit this morning? I went to seminary twice and my undergraduate degree is also in ministry, and over the years, I have taken several classes on preaching (I know that’s hard to believe, but it’s true!), and not once was I instructed that insulting your congregation was a good way to start a sermon. I really don’t think John the Baptist’s abrupt and fiery preaching style would go over very well here or in any other pulpits across America. Nevertheless, here he is, on this Gaudete Sunday, on which we focus on joy, calling us a bunch of snakes!

And he goes on to warn us of destruction, that the axe is ready to hack away at lifeless trees and toss them into an unquenchable fire where they will burn along with the chaff separated from the grain by the coming Messiah. According to Luke, this fiery message of John was not one of doom and gloom but of salvation. His was a message of good news, and the good news can bring us joy.

For we, like the snakes of old, can turn from our serpentine behavior and shed our old, rough, reptilian skin. We can repent, turning from our sinister acts of greed and injustice and move towards becoming more fair and just, generous and selfless. And isn’t this good news and a reason to rejoice?

For us, the axe in God’s hand is not a source of fear or foreboding; rather, it is a source of great grace, for it hacks off the branches and other parts of us that are diseased or dead. And we fret not for the unquenchable fire of God brings us blessing, for it is a purifying fire that burns away all that is contaminated and impure. And so we pray for the pruning and purifying work of God in our lives, that God would search us, know us, reveal to us all that is in need of being pruned away and purified, and equip us with all we need to turn toward God and so find healing and wholeness.

We long for God’s cleansing work in our world. Wouldn’t it be a cause for celebration if the evil of greed could be hacked out of our world? Wouldn’t we rejoice if the demon of violence could be burned out of us? And so we pray for

the axe and the fire to come to the world, that it might be healed and made whole, that all the world's people would act with more fairness and justice, generosity and unselfishness.

Like desert-dwelling John the Baptizer, we await with eager expectation the coming day of salvation for ourselves and the world. We join also with the prophet Isaiah, who expected and awaited deliverance in his own time of desert-dwelling. Though living in a dry wilderness of exile in Babylon, Isaiah envisioned the abundant waters of salvation coming to his people, that they would draw water from the wells of God's grace and be sustained. God's grace sustained them indeed and was cause for their celebratory songs and shouts, and God's grace sustains us and is cause for our own rejoicing.

So let us draw from the abundant wells of God's grace with joy! We draw from these deep waters whenever we gather, as we do today, to remember God's saving acts in our lives and to give God praise. God's grace is splashed upon us from above through our other traditions and rituals that remind us of God's ever-present love for us, such as when we sing of God's love as we did here during last Sunday night's Christmas Cantata and as we will do when our children and youth lead us in recounting the story of Christ's birth during next Sunday's Christmas pageant. Other seasonal rituals like setting up trees, lighting candles, singing carols, and giving gifts are all sources of God's grace that can bring us God's joy, so let us continue these good traditions -- even in these pandemic times -- and rejoice!

Just as, in so many ways, God splashes the waters of grace upon us, we are called to splash the waters of grace upon others. We do this through continuing John's work of proclaiming message of repentance, of continually calling out the evils of the world's injustice and greed and the need to turn from these. We do this when we live justly and give to others generously, which are some of our deepest commitments, guiding us to work to feed bodies, which we do through our Food Pantry and Community Dinners, and our work to feed spirits and minds, which we do through our CE program, our Purpose School's service to a hundred little ones and their families, our support of the Salvation Army Toy Drive, our ministry of lovingly knitting prayer shawls that get draped around the lonely at nursing

homes, and our deacons' caring visits with the elderly. We do this through our monetary support of the church, which enables all of this good work!

Dear friends, God's salvation is splashing and splashing in our lives and all around us! Let us continue in all of our work to receive the waters of salvation and to share God's grace through acts of love, for love is the anti-venom needed to save our snake-bit and suffering world. So let us love, and let us rejoice, give thanks, and sing! Amen.