

Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Luke 3:7-18

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Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## GOD'S PRIME RATE

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." <sup>12</sup>Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" <sup>13</sup>He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." *Luke 3:10-14*

As Advent precedes and prepares us for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, so the Advent gospel readings focus on John the Baptist who readies the people to the emergence of Jesus into their lives.

John is an Elijah-like figure, a loner who dresses more like an aborigine than a traditional prophet, lives in the inhospitable desert off locusts and wild honey, scares children, and often comes across as an irascible curmudgeon. The way John's sermon opens he would never have made it through the barefoot Contessa's hospitality class or Preaching 101, beginning his sermon to the a congregation gathered in the wilderness, with "You brood of vipers. Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?" A sermon that goes on to wield a sharp axe and the fires of perdition.

But when the people ask John, "What then shall we do?", which is to say, "In what, then, can we place our hope?", John suddenly turns more pastoral and humane. What's striking about his three examples is that they don't propose giving away all that we have but *sharing* what we have. Whoever has a spare coat gathering lint in the closet, give it away to someone who has none. If anyone needs *two* coats it's not us but the woman in plain sight in Philadelphia, huddled in an alley in fifteen degrees under a cardboard box—wouldn't you say? In a subsistence economy like Palestine, where a denarius was not only a day's wage but a day's expenses just to get by, having to pay a tax, or more likely to bribe a toll collector just to get to and from work, was a hideous daily burden. So, take only what is just and fair, John tells the soldiers, and don't steal by threats of violence from those who are living on the edge—which in John's day was the vast majority. Worldwide, the subsistence poor are still the majority of the human family. In a PBS news piece last week on corruption in Afghanistan, the average daily income was \$2, of which, the reporter said, 20 percent is used each day to bribe the police, Afghan soldiers, public officials and so on, just to get by. Imagine the hope it would bring to an Afghan day laborer if, on arriving at the slaughterhouse in the hope of work, he slips the gatekeeper the customary "fee" for getting in, and the gatekeeper says, "That's OK, my friend, you keep it, you need it more than me." Wouldn't that be a moment touched with monumental grace—a memory sealed so indelibly that the years would never mask its fragrance.

After John tells the people what to do, the next verse (.15), says the people were "filled with expectation." Hope! That intangible something that cracks open a secret door, if you will. Hope breathes life because its source is in what another freely gives away.

A student at Duke told Bishop Will Willimon about a summer volunteer project he undertook working at a Jesuit home in the center of one of our blighted cities, where they served the very poor. They worked all day every day, handing out food and ministering to every imaginable human need as best they could. One particularly long and difficult day was drawing to a close, and the student and an old Jesuit monk finally took care of the last person in line. Just as the student was pushing closed the big oak doors of the center, he looked out and saw one more forlorn figure shuffling down the driveway. The student looked

at the figure, and realizing how worn out he was himself, muttered more loudly than he intended, “Jesus Christ!” The old Jesuit peeked through the opening, and said softly, “Could be, could be.” And after a brief pause, “We had better open the door.”

Hope. The Hebrew word has the root meaning of to twist or twine something very long and fine, as in a plumb line. It’s related to *kiven*, the thread of a spider’s web—with which hope has so much affinity. Something perilously fine yet capable of being infinitely strong. Hope is so often based on a desperate wish that’s all but threadbare. But hope spun from the promises of Christ has the sort of potency of Catholic Bishop Aloysius Jin. Perhaps you remember the diminutive ninety year old Bishop of Shanghai, whom we met on a trip to China in 2007. He spent twenty-seven years in jail for his faith, seven of those in solitary confinement. He memorized the entire gospel of John, and prayed a verse a day for those 10,000 days. *10,000 days!* That’s hope.

God will provide a way, when we ask what is of God—that is, when we ask “in Jesus’ name.” Like the time two years ago this past week, when, twice in one long day I drove through the dead of night to Sibley Hospital in Georgetown, DC., hunched over the wheel as though it were a life preserver, committing to God our daughter Carolyn, and newborn Ellie. Hope came when I gave them away to God. And they lived.

You have been there.

There are some terms attached to this loan, this hope. God gives it against a promise still to be fulfilled, which demands trust. The agenda is not ours to set. And the thing we ask cannot be about our wants, like praying for the home team to win, but our needs. Neither is the time frame ours, as though we alone know what the limited options are. There is one prerequisite for the gift of hope that we are asked to pass on, once received. It is, as John makes very clear, that we come first in repentance, that we come clean before God, and stripped of our own agendas. Otherwise God has no space in which to work in us.

Henri Nouwen has written that when two people cling to each other in desperation, it is as . . .

two hands locked in fear. They connect because they cannot survive individually. But as they interlock they also realize that they cannot take away each other’s loneliness. And it is then that friction arises and tension increases. Often a breakup is the final result. But God calls a man and a woman into a different relationship. It is a relationship that looks like two hands folded in prayer. The fingertips touch, but the hands can create a space, like a little tent. Such a space is the space created by love, not fear. Marriage is creating a new, open space, where God’s love can be revealed to the “stranger”: the child, the friend, the visitor.

In other words, something of life is given away; given away for God. What have you got that you need to give away?

Amen.