

December 17, Third Sunday of Advent, Anne-Marie Jeffery  
[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#); [Philippians 4:4-7\(8-9\)](#); [Luke 3:7-18](#)

When I was in college, I was on the volleyball team and I always remember one particular game. Part of the reason I remember the game was because our team won - which didn't happen too often. The other reason I remember it was the coach of the other team. My team was winning and she was not pleased at all. Maybe it was because my team was from a small college in Westchester County in NY had come into New York City and was beating her team. Maybe it was because her players were not playing well. Whatever it was, she kept yelling at them. She kept saying, "RELAX!" in an anything but relaxing voice, and her players certainly did not seem to be relaxing. In fact, she seemed to be making them more tense and nervous. In fact, she was beginning to make our team nervous. I guess she was trying to stir them up or shock them into another state where their game would come together, but her yelling wasn't working. It just seemed to make things worse and in the end they lost.

The other team's coach reminds me of John the Baptist in this morning's gospel. It seems as if John is yelling at the crowd. His words have the potential to turn a person off. He was talking to people who came out to be baptized and greets them in this way? Imagine if our greeters used John's words as people came in, "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" I'd be surprised if people still came in. I'd run right back out the door. This gospel will shake you right out of your merry Christmas mood. It is disturbing. John is not being very cheerful in this gospel and some people remember this reading from past years because of its nature. In fact I heard someone saying, "I like the Advent except for those gloom and doom readings from John the Baptist. Gloom and doom. Calling us names. Warnings about bearing good fruit. It is easy to go into a state where you just ignore this reading. A state that reminds me of my teenage years - you know when all you wanted to do was watch TV or listen to your music and your parents kept yelling at you to clean up your room or do your other chores. One just wants to block this lesson out and get back to decorating the Christmas tree and wrapping the presents and thinking about good Christmas food.

John's words from the bible translation called The Message are interesting. Listen.

*"When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.' Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there— children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. <sup>9</sup> What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire." <sup>i</sup>*

What caught my attention about this translation was that baptism as the popular thing to do. It is not quite that today. I'm sure if I went into Macy's or the Metro Center and began telling people about a baptism of repentance that would save them from God's judgment, that I wouldn't get a lot of takers. I tried to think of a parallel in today's world to something that would be popular and I thought of perhaps going to some kind of yoga class or martial arts class that you heard would give you all the energy you need and a life filled with happiness and satisfaction. Imagine arriving at such a class to be yelled at, to basically be called a hypocrite and to be accused of trying to find the easy way out. It would be as if the person leading the class were to say "Do you think if you do a few exercises that you can be happy? Who told you to come in here?" I think most of us would be appalled and leave. Yelling at people doesn't usually get you very far as was the case with the coach and the volleyball team.

However, the crowd who are listening to John don't leave. In fact they ask him what they should do and he tells them. "If you have two coats, give one away," he said. "Do the same with your food."

to the Tax men who came to be baptized he said, "No more extortion— collect only what is required by law." and to the soldiers he told "No shakedowns, no blackmail— and be content with your rations." <sup>ii</sup> He tells them of the one who is coming after him – the one who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and Fire. I don't know what made them stay and listen, but it seems that they did. What do we do with these stirring words, these disturbing words: words that accuse us of being a brood of vipers, words that tell us that our life has to be changed and that the changes can't just be on the outside, words that challenge us and how we live? How can we hear these words of John? What will make us stay and listen? How can we not turn off, ignore them and go back to our Christmas preparations?

Maybe it is not so much up to us. God's working in our lives is neither in our power nor under our control. Our collect today began – Stir up your power, O Lord and with great might come among us because we are sorely hindered by our sins. It doesn't say stir up our power. It says stir up God's power. It is God's power in us and around us that will change our lives. It is God's power that will lift the sins that sorely hinder us and that will bring us out of our state of contentment or our state of distraction with the world.

It is God's power that brings us back, as a prayer, attributed to Sir Francis Drake says, that when we having "fallen in love with life, have ceased to dream of eternity, when in our efforts to build a new earth, have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim."<sup>iii</sup>

How does God's power come to us and work in us? Maybe the very thing we need is to be disturbed. We need to be shaken out of our reveries and look up. Look up from wrapping our gifts. Look up from our shopping and all our preparations. Look up from our frustration with the world. Pause for a moment and see if God is there banging on the doors to our hearts. We might be surprised.

And how might that look – God breaking into our hearts. What will it look like when God is stirring up God's power in us? Well I don't know. It think will be different for all of us.

Maybe we will call up that family member or friend that we have been estranged from and start anew. Maybe we reach out to that person in the office that who seems so

alone. Maybe we will see the path to doing that thing we have dreamed about for so long. Maybe we will share what God is doing in our lives with our friends and watch their lives be changed. Maybe we will come to a new peace with where we are in our lives and move forward knowing that God is with us.

God is the one who breaks into our lives. Our part is to look up and pay attention and be ready to welcome Christ into our hearts. So yes we need these disturbing words.

We need to hear John saying to us “You brood of vipers. You people who like to settle into the way things are and to get comfortable, forgetting the dream of God and the possibilities of the kingdom.” So disturb us God - disturb us so that new life might arise in us – the new life that comes with the coming of Christ. As the prayer that I quoted from before ends,

“Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,  
To venture on wider seas  
Where storms will show your mastery;  
Where losing sight of land,  
We shall find the stars.

We ask You to push back  
The horizons of our hopes;  
And to push into the future  
In strength, courage, hope, and love.”<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 3:7-9, The Message

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 3:11-14, The Message

<sup>iii</sup> Prayer- Disturb Us, Lord - Attributed to Sir Francis Drake,  
[http://www.worldprayers.org/frameit.cgi?/archive/prayers/invocations/disturb\\_us\\_lord\\_when\\_we.html](http://www.worldprayers.org/frameit.cgi?/archive/prayers/invocations/disturb_us_lord_when_we.html)

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