

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
 on Advent 3: Rose Sunday (17 December 2006):
 Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-18

The Truth...and Nothing but the Truth

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?...the chaff [God] will burn with unquenchable fire.”

[Luke 3:7, 17]

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice...Have no anxiety about anything...”

[Philippians 4:4, 6]

“Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...”

[Collect for Advent 3]

Wow! You talk about mixed messages: Today is full of them, and we are not talking about all the chatter surrounding the “The Study Group’s” Report on Iraq. And so it is...in this crazy, counter-intuitive season of Advent. No wonder even Christians – like us --tend to ignore this season’s beckoning. “Brood of vipers!” “Rejoice in the Lord always” “Stir up your power, O Lord, and come among us.” “The chaff [God] will burn away with unquenchable fire.” “With many exhortations, he preached good news to the people.” What’s the deal here?

In this morning’s sermon, I want to try to make some sense of all this – because deep within all these words and images lies a deep and important truth; but it is not an easy truth. So, to try to shed some illumination on what we have heard and to plumb the mature and important truth of this occasion, let me repeat a story that someone I

used to work for told a long time ago about himself. The story goes like this.

The year I turned 30, I was in trouble, though I thought I was just moving into normal adulthood. I had enough sense of my trouble to have sought serious counseling. I felt caught in a web of uncontrollable circumstances. I was scared, confused, looking for comfort, understanding, acceptance. The pieces of my life were bad, my job demeaning, money troubles, putting on weight, no exercise, long, boozy lunches. Martinis at night, asleep in front of television, a good portion of each day staring out the window. Depression.

I asked my counselor for the name of a good physician to whom I might go for a thorough physical. I hadn’t had one for several years, thought I should as I turned 30. He gave me

the name of a Doctor Waters and I made an appointment.

It was my first encounter with a big-time doctor. I went into his office and had a physical given by his staff. Two weeks later, I returned for a consultation with the great man, whom I had not even seen during the first visit. As I was shown into his office, he motioned me to a chair opposite his desk, where he was sitting, poring over some papers, obviously my test results. He didn't so much as look up as I took my seat.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered as he flipped the pages. From his tone I knew he wasn't praying. "An obese 30 year old, the most obscene thing in the world." He looked up, greeting my nervous grin with a scowl. "Mr. Blane," he began, "I wouldn't be your doctor if you paid me \$10,000 a visit! I read in your numbers the story of an early death. 20 pounds overweight, on the road to alcoholism, depressed. I'd bet you've got an ulcer. At the rate you're destroying your life, you may not make it to 40."

My old boss concluded his story with these familiar words: *So, with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.* Then he added a post-script: *"Today I count that awful hour in Dr. Water's office as one of the most wonderful, grace-filled moments of my life. A chance to repent [to turn around]. Good News."*

Rowan Williams, our Archbishop of Canterbury, has offered a pertinent comment that

speaks to the centrality of what both John the Baptist and my old boss say to us on this Rose Sunday in Advent, this "Rejoice" Sunday. Listen.

"Truth," the Archbishop says, "truth is what makes love possible; love is what makes truth bearable."

I have often asked among you whether we love each other enough to speak the truth to one another. Sadly, it often seems the answer is "no, there is not enough care or love to bother with the truth. We seem to settle with passing politeness that neither listens nor cares to take the other seriously. We smile politely and say things are great, knowing full well that they are not.

"Truth is what makes love possible; love is what makes truth bearable."

We engage in this emotional deception because it is too easy for us to believe that what we need most is for someone to confirm us and comfort us. What we feel we need the least is someone with a winnowing fork in hand, who sifts the chaff of our lives in preparation for its burning. It is quite natural -- and understandable -- to stay away from these kinds of people and to stay away from any situation that might even hint at the possibility that our chaff might see the torch. And I believe the reason for this is that you and I often worry that chaff might be all we really are.

"Dust you are and to dust you shall return." We are haunted by the real possibility that these sentiments may be more than just church words we hear on Ash Wednesday.

But the truth is this. We are much more than chaff, even though we are probably more familiar with our chaff than we are intimate with the wheat within us. But we are wheat because we belong to God. And that is the truth! “Rejoice!”

“Rejoice.” For the love of God compels the Holy One to reveal the wheat that is in us, and this means burning the chaff because the chaff hurts us; it enslaves us; it kills us.

Of this process of truth and love, it has been said that “to those who are strangers to God, he comes as judge. To those who trust God, he comes as Savior. To those who love God, he comes as bridegroom.” There is a lot of chaff around us to be sure. The news headlines testify to this fact on an hourly basis. The heart-breaking sadness is that we have adjusted to the chaff’s presence so much that we call it “normal.” It is what we expect. Worse, it is what we often cherish in our lives. But our God comes to us with a fiery and fierce vengeance, to release us from the husks, to make clear that life is meant to be about the wheat.

So, “Rejoice!” “Lift up your hearts.” Our God comes to find us amidst the chaff, to set us free, to bring us home.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!” “that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.”¹ Amen.

¹ Book of Common Prayer, Proper Preface for the season of Advent, page 378.