

Advent 3C (12/16/2018)
 Zephaniah 3:14-20
 Isaiah 12:2-6
 Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

The fulfillment of God's reign is a long process. Although we may be tempted to despair of the circumstances of the world in our time, we recall that ours is only one of myriad generations through which God has worked to make good on God's promise of redemption. With gratitude, we honor the faithful work of our forebears; with conviction, we recommit ourselves to our own work; and with patience, we entrust the future to the ones who will come after us. All in all, we cling to the hope of our calling, that God's redemption will one day be completed, and the weary world will finally know peace.

John the Baptizer is such a buzz kill! Is it too much to ask that I be allowed to trim my tree in peace? Must he show up every Advent and cut through the holiday spirit with his strident call to repentance? "You brood of vipers! ...Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the foot of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Translation: *Even if you've listened to your conscience and heeded my call out to the Jordan, you're still snakes. Don't you dare rest on your ethnic or religious laurels; God can make a faithful person out of anyone or anything, even these lifeless rocks. So, you'd better start living like God's people, or God will cut you off.*

Happy Advent, you brood of vipers!

For all his fiery rhetoric, however, John must have been persuasive. The people don't just shake their heads and move on; they listen intently, and even ask follow-up questions: "Teacher, what should we do?" And, John responds with surprisingly practical guidance: *Give to all who are in need, do your work with integrity, be kind, and practice gratitude.* The crowds are so taken with John's preaching that not only do they

consent to his baptism of repentance and inquire about how to live better lives, but they also start to wonder if he might be the Messiah promised of old. Yet, at the very moment that the spotlight on John is the brightest, he turns it: “One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.”

John plays his role faithfully, preparing the way of the Lord. He even has the privilege of knowing Jesus for who he is, anticipating God’s life-giving influence in Jesus’ ministry. But, think of the outcome of John’s own ministry. Just as Jesus is beginning to develop a following of his own, John will be arrested for calling Herod’s conduct into question, held in the king’s prison, and ultimately put to death as a pawn in a political game. John won’t get to hear the end of the gospel story. He won’t be there for Jesus’ great feeding and teaching, his courageous confrontation with religious and political power, his faithfulness to the reign of God even unto death, and his resurrection to new life, God’s final stamp of approval. **John’s time will come to an end before Jesus turns the world away from fear and hostility and toward faith and love.** *One who is more powerful than I is coming*, John might have realized, *and I won’t get to see him fulfill his purpose.*

In this way, John the Baptizer is a tragic figure. But is he that different from the rest of us? God sweeps us all up into the work of redemption, the work to which both John and Jesus were single-mindedly devoted. But so many centuries later, the world’s redemption has yet to be completed. **Think of the multitudes over the millennia who have lived and died in the hope of seeing evil and pain and death erased, yet who’ve had to be satisfied with incremental progress.**

Have you heard the story of Sophie Scholl? Originally a member of the German Girls League, the female wing of the Hitler Youth movement, Sophie quickly became disillusioned with fascism and all its oppressive consequences. As a twenty-year-old university student in Munich, she and her brother Hans joined the White Rose, a nonviolent student resistance movement. Sophie purchased an illegal typewriter and began producing leaflets for guerilla distribution around Munich. And in spite of the incredible risk involved in criticizing the regime, the White Rose was unflinching. One of the group's leaflets, for instance, read:

Why do you allow these men who are in power to rob you step by step, openly and in secret, of one domain of your rights after another, until one day nothing at all will be left but a mechanized state system presided over by criminals? Is your spirit already so crushed by abuse that you forget it is your right—or rather, your moral duty—to eliminate this system?¹

Sophie and Hans Scholl were disseminating the White Rose's sixth leaflet when they were apprehended. Refusing to accept a lesser sentence in exchange for admitting that her brother had manipulated her, Sophie was convicted of high treason and sentenced to death. Prior to her execution, she reflected on her purpose: "How can we expect righteousness to prevail," she asked, "when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause? It is such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go. But what does my death matter if through us thousands are awakened and stirred to action?"²

Sophie Scholl died in February, 1943, at the age of twenty-one. She never got to see the downfall of fascism in Europe; nevertheless she helped pave the way for its

¹ Whitney Milam, "Sophie Scholl: The German Student Who Led an Anti-Nazi Resistance Movement," <https://amysmartgirls.com/sophie-scholl-the-german-student-who-led-an-anti-nazi-resistance-movement-ef4c8d2f4d96>.

² <https://spartacus-educational.com/GERschollS.htm>; <http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/holocaust/articles-20/sophie-scholl-white-rose/>.

demise. And, her example is an inspiration to all who continue in the struggle for a more just world, the world God intends for us.

Dear church, **the fulfillment of God's reign is a long process. Although we may be tempted to despair of the circumstances of the world in our time, recall that ours is only one of myriad generations through which God has worked to make good on God's promise of redemption.** The ancient wisdom of Rabbi Tarfon is just as relevant now as it's ever been: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work," he said, "but neither are you free to desist from it." So, with gratitude, let's honor the faithful work of our forebears; with conviction, let's recommit ourselves to our own work; and with patience, let's entrust the future to the ones who will come after us. All in all, let's cling to the hope of our calling, that God's redemption will one day be completed, and the weary world will finally know peace.