

**Sunday, December 13, 2015**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Renewed in Love”**

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One of the most important lessons learned in seminary training is to always read the passages before and after the passage on which you will preach.

By doing so, you get a much clearer picture of what is happening in a text and you avoid the pitfall of choosing scripture quotes to fit your intended message.

Reflecting on the meaning of scripture is much more challenging than finding scripture to make a point.

Today’s three readings, taken alone, each conveys a different message and tone.

The reading from Isaiah comes across as a song of praise.

The reading from Zephaniah seems to be a message of hope.

Luke’s gospel sounds like a condemnation of the rulers – the brood of vipers who have come to seek baptism.

An expanded reading of all three passages, however, reveal both a dire warning about communities who have turned away from God and a promise of forgiveness and grace to come.

Isaiah’s prophecy came around the year 735 BC;

Zephaniah in the year 640 BC and Luke’s gospel is placed around the year 30 AD.

A span of almost 800 years and now today in the year 2015 this message couldn’t be more relevant.

Each of the prophets, Isaiah, Zephaniah and John the Baptist call on their communities to abandon their evil ways and to turn their hearts to God who loves them.

Isaiah promises that the Holy One of Israel will be found in the midst of the people.

Zephaniah promises that the “Lord, your God, is in your midst...He will rejoice over you and renew you in his love.”

John promises that the one to come will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit, gathering them to himself.

These messages are timeless.

These are the advent promises that give us hope in a world gone mad.

These are the reminders that we, people of faith, are not to be afraid.

Throughout time, our creator has restored us to wholeness again, and again.

When we repent-turn toward God; God welcomes us-embraces us.

To repent in the times of Isaiah and Zephaniah was a communal activity.

Repentance in the Hebrew scripture refers to the idea of turning back, retracing one's steps in order to return to the right way.

The prophets continually called to the people to change behavior so as to bring about a moral or ethical conversion.

John's call for repentance leads to forgiveness of sins and getting ready to welcome the kingdom of God.

Individuals, when baptized, are expected to experience a personal transformation.

Each of the passages this morning present us with a picture of God coming to dwell in our midst.

Our hymns today speak of promise, of reconciliation, of peace.

These are the messages of the season that we must carry in our hearts.

We must examine our own lives, as well as those of the society in which we live, and determine whether or not we are on the right paths.

Do our lives reflect the goodness of God?

Does our way of life contribute to the greater good of all God's children?

Is communal well-being taken into consideration when decisions are made?

My friends, we are a Christian people – Christ centered.

We are called to repent for any part of our life that does not welcome Christ.

Repent – turn away from those things that are not of God and turn toward those things that bring God closer to you, those things that bring you joy.

Hearing the stories of our ancestors and recognizing the similarities in our lives ought to embolden us to take action.

We know that when communities, or individuals, repent and turn away from wrongdoing; when space is made for God to enter our lives – God does just that.

God comes to us – as a baby, as a spirit, as hope, as peace, as joy. God comes.

When God comes we receive the promise of renewal – the gift of transformation.

People may ask how we can light a candle of joy or sing hymns of praise when there is so much heartache in the world.

You know my answer to that is that now more than ever we must raise our voices in praise and rejoice with all the energy that we can muster because we are a people of hope.

We are a people of peace.

We are a people of joy.

God has promised to come into our midst and to make things whole – to restore our lives, to renew us with God’s love and we know from our ancestor’s stories that God will fulfill that promise.

*A poem*...Putting Faith In Goodness

In the darkest night,

light radiates;

In the driest wilderness,

streams flow;

In the most disorienting confusion,

truth whispers;

In the most turbulent storms,

peace endures;

In the shadow of death,

life is born.

No matter what evil may do,

no matter what destruction may come,

no matter what death may threaten,

we praise you, O God,

that life and light and beauty are not overcome,

And we commit to your call

to live and proclaim our commitment

to put our faith in goodness.

My friends, Let us open our hearts and raise our voices and welcome God’s holy spirit as it blooms among us.