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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Third Sunday of Advent  
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Lectionary Year C: Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

There are times when a little blast from my past will burst into my consciousness -- perhaps an old song that I had long forgotten from my CD collection, or the thought of an old acquaintance I haven't seen in years. These occurrences usually have one thing in common: They're only good for a moment of nostalgia and nothing more. If I were to scrounge up a CD player and play that song, I might be able to think back to where I was and what I was thinking at the time, but, after a while, I'd be saying to myself, "I actually listened to this!" Similarly, an old acquaintance could be encountered in some random place like a busy city sidewalk, and he and I might say "hello" and share some memories, but then we'd eventually realize that we've grown apart and really don't have much in common anymore.

This thing or this person bursts into one's present reality -- like a real blast from the past -- and vanishes about as quickly as it appears. The impact of it all is affected by the simple fact that, in my case, I'm a much different person now than I was as a freshman or sophomore in college. Only a few things really stuck with me from those years...one might say that they were the best music and the best friends.

Looking to our Gospel text, one could easily observe that a person like John the Baptist bursts into our present reality...but not as a blast from the past and instead as a blast from the future. We turn a corner in the final two Sundays of Advent where the anticipated future is of the earthly Christ who comes

into the world to be Emmanuel -- God with us -- in contrast to the future anticipated in the First and Second Sundays of Advent, where Christ is seen returning as the Righteous Judge. This change in emphasis is reflected in, for example, the color of rose in our altar paraments and vestments and the more joyful tenor found in some of our Scripture readings. And into all of this bursts John the Baptist -- God's own bull in a china shop -- who foretells of the coming of the Messiah, albeit with a tone that is considerably less than joyful.

Of course, John the Baptist's prophecy anticipates the ministry of the adult Jesus, and of all biblical and historical figures, we seem to be missing a big chunk of Jesus' biography -- that being between his infancy and adulthood (not counting a little snippet about his adolescence in the Gospel of Luke) -- and thus, we may be puzzled as to the selection of a text like this for the Third Sunday of Advent. Again, we're not being pointed toward the Nativity scene of the Bethlehem stable; rather, we're thrown into the flames of John the Baptist's fiery proclamation of the Messiah, who will teach and proclaim the Kingdom in such a way that no one will anticipate.

One could argue that John the Baptist wants to "make it stick" -- as in offering something more than a little encounter that might grab our attention for a moment and then disappear. (Remember my example about that old song from my CD collection and that acquaintance from the past.) One can "make it stick" with sharp and attention-grabbing rhetoric, such as, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7b). It is also intriguing to note that John the Baptist's audience must've been lulled into complacency after generations of false security granted through their ancestral faith.

Listen again to what he says: "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" (Luke 3:8b). That's quite an image, and one that foreshadows the meaning of Christ's Messiahship; ancestry with Abraham will no longer be what it once was when all are adopted into God's family -- Jew and Gentile alike -- in Jesus Christ. But John the Baptist reminds his audience that there is still something that they can do...they can repent. Again, though, this is more than a "gee, I'm sorry" kind of repentance; it is, instead, in the Greek sense of metanoia, which is a 180-degree turn from one's past ways. This includes baptism along with radical alterations of one's habits -- if one has two coats, one has to share the other, and likewise with food (Luke 3:11). Tax collectors shouldn't take more than their share, and soldiers shouldn't extort citizens (Luke 3:13-14).

We must, apparently, assume that these people weren't very well behaved based on John the Baptist's exhortations!

As John the Baptist now bursts into our present reality, how do we respond? We know, for example, that his "baptism of repentance" has been superseded by our Sacrament of Holy Baptism, so those of us who are baptized may say that much is done. But we continue to anticipate the coming of the Messiah, so the repentance to which John the Baptist called people two thousand years ago applies to the present day, as well. So, what kinds of 180-degree turns of metanoia are happening in us? Mind you, these need not be joyless acts of giving up things that legitimately offer us contentment. Instead, they can be a turn from worry, despair, or pride. It can be loosing ourselves from things that hold us captive, like anger, resentment, or bitterness. It can be something like a New

Year's resolution...except that it's something we actually keep.

I'm one who considers New Year's resolutions to be very dubious undertakings, incidentally. If you're going to attempt some sort of behavior modification, what's so magical about January 1st? Couldn't you do that on May 16th or August 23rd? Repentance, as John the Baptist might envision it, can happen anytime before the Advent of our Lord, and it carries with it something that New Year's resolutions often don't -- accountability. Repentance holds you accountable before God, which, in theory, should prevent recidivism.

And, while John the Baptist doesn't exactly put us in the most "rosy" mood today, let me remind you that the Advent of our Lord is, indeed, an occasion for joyful anticipation. Remember the words of the apostle Paul from our Second Reading: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:4-5). Should we repent and thereby clear our hearts and minds of worry, despair, and pride -- or anger, resentment, and bitterness -- what will there be left to do? Rejoice, perhaps?

The other day, I did have an old song from my CD collection pop into my head -- one by an obscure "alternative" rock band that you've probably never heard of. (One might say it isn't surprising why they didn't become famous!) I thought about the song, the lyrics, and the band, and I exclaimed to myself, "I actually listened to this!" Granted, nearly thirty years separates the Ryan Fischer of today from that song's initial release, but this example only goes to show that I've changed...hopefully for the better. But this is part of a greater eternal truth, which is that all people change. So if change is possible, re-

penitance must be possible, and what, then, can we say of Christ who is to come?

We can say that we change ourselves so that he can change us! We say, "We believe" in repentance of our unbelief, and Christ comes into our hearts and minds to free us from everything we could possibly repent of. If you're not sure that this is what Christ came into the world to do, think again. As the apostle Paul says, "The Lord is near," we wait in joyful anticipation of all that is already real in the Kingdom of God -- eternal life and salvation -- those very things that Christ will bring us.

And never, ever let yourself think that you cannot change. While John the Baptist bursts into our present reality and sounds downright scary, I believe that this is but one of many reminders that we can change. We can change from worry, despair, and pride, and from anger, resentment, and bitterness to...rejoicing. We can rejoice in the One who is to come and in all the gifts that he will bring us.

Amen.