

3 Advent
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Canticle 9
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Rev. Molly F. James
St. John's Episcopal Church
Essex, CT
December 13, 2009

May God's word be spoken, May God's Word be heard, and May that point us to the living Word who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I am going to let you in on a little secret. There is something green in the office and it is growing. No, it isn't a new potted plant. It is the pile of forms for the Christmas Alternative Giving Program. Every day the box gets a little fuller. It is a glorious and wonderful sight!

There are many reasons why that box is becoming fuller: for some, the Christmas Alternative Giving Program is an easy and worthwhile way to do their Christmas Shopping. They consider the money invested in this program to be very well spent. For others, this program is a great way to give a gift to someone we love who already seems to have everything ~ and not only do our loved ones feel good about receiving the gift, we feel good about giving the gift.

But I want to add a new reason as to why we should participate in the Christmas Alternative Giving Program, perhaps a more profound one. When you and I participate in the Christmas Alternative Giving Program, we are participating with God in His SALVATION of the world. Yup. I said it. We are participating with God in bringing about SALVATION.

Now you may be thinking that this idea is somewhat medieval and that

salvation by actions is something that the Reformation tossed out long ago. To be certain, as Christians, we absolutely affirm that salvation is a gift from God. Our salvation is something that was accomplished once, for all people, on the Cross by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But what we, who possess knowledge of this gift and who treasure it greatly ~ what we can do is to help God share its reality with others. It is not enough to simply say that Jesus is the light of the world and trust that people will find their way on their own. We must therefore say that Jesus is the light of the world and then show that light! ~ and provide that light so that others may see it and give glory to God in heaven.

Look, for example, at John the Baptist in the Gospel reading this morning. John is preaching to the crowds about repentance, about preparing the way for Jesus to come into their lives and hearts. When the people ask him what they should do, he says "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

John's instructions are simple. Share what you have. Give so that others may benefit. And his instructions are very important for they remind us that God's salvation can be made real ~ it can be seen ~ and it can be felt on an earthly level ~ at the level of human contact and daily living.

Latin American theologian Ivone Gebara once wrote, "For most people,

salvation is above all a concrete issue, immediate, tied to some actual lack, a suffering that is evident every day.” That is why I say that when we participate in the Christmas Alternative Giving Program ~ when we participate in filling a lack, when we strive to alleviate a person’s suffering ~ we are participating with God in salvation. We are preparing the way, just as John the Baptist implores us, for Jesus to come into the life of another. Our words and our actions are fused with God’s will and help make God’s love known in the life of one who may question not only God’s love but also God’s very existence on a daily basis, just as we may in the midst of our own trials and tribulations.

Thus when we reach out to meet the basic needs of our fellow human beings we are participating in God's salvific love. The depth and breadth of our actions reflect the depth and breadth of God's love – they help God bring hope and love into painful and difficult situations. And in a way that goes far beyond the use of words, our actions can help bring the light of Christ into another person’s darkness.

We often talk about the internal and contemplative aspects of our spiritual lives. We talk about our prayer lives and how to make changes in our own minds and hearts, and these are important aspects of our faith life. They are not to be overlooked or neglected, but neither is the active element that John the Baptist calls us to in this morning's Gospel. Note that the crowds did not ask John "What

should we think or what we should believe?" They asked him, "What should we DO?" What we do matters. How we live our lives matters. As St. Francis said, "Preach the Gospel and if necessary use words." We say a great deal with our actions, about who we are and what we believe as Christians. We say a great deal with our actions, AND we have the opportunity to DO, to accomplish, a great deal with our actions. The actions we do have the potential to participate in another's salvation. An important part of what we DO is giving of our own labor - giving our time and talents to help others, but as the Christmas Alternative Giving Program reminds us, that is not the only way to "DO" for others.

Although it may be hard for some to think that writing a check or making a credit card payment is a salvific activity, I guarantee you that it is. Because of the relationships we have formed and the ministries of our outreach partners, the dollars we give are transformed into tangible, physical entities that bring God's saving love into the lives of others. Because of our actions and their ministry, salvation comes in the form of a hot meal in the company of others and a bag full of groceries given without any questions asked. It comes in the form of two by fours and roof shingles. Salvation comes in the form of the joyful abandon of a small child jumping into a pond for the first time. Salvation comes in the form of medical care and mosquito nets. It is education and clean water. It is all these things and so much more.

May we therefore continue to rejoice this day and in the days to come as the green forms keep arriving for this year's Christmas Alternative Giving Program. Because as each box that is checked, as each payment that is made, we have the marvelous opportunity to see and to witness to God's saving love. We also have an opportunity to live into the reality of our own salvation because in reaching out, we are filled with the joyful knowledge that we are serving Christ himself.

May that joy therefore continue to inspire us to follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist, sharing what we have, and rejoicing as we make more and more room in this world for our Savior to come.

AMEN.