

Homily for December 13, 2009 (3rd Sunday of Advent, C)
Zepheniah 3:14-18a; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

One day, an old professor was asked to speak at a business school on the efficient planning of time. Rising slowly from his chair, he held up a large empty glass cylinder before the students. After placing it on the table next to him, he took a dozen large stones the size of tennis balls and delicately placed them one by one in the glass until it was full. When no more stones could be added, he asked the students, “Do you think the glass is full?”

They all answered 'Yes!'

He bent down and brought out a flask filled with crushed stones which he slowly and gently poured over the large stones, moving the glass so that the crushed stones could infiltrate between the large stones to the bottom. “Is the glass full this time?” he asked.

Realizing their previous error, the students responded with some hesitation, “Perhaps not yet.”

And thus the professor continued...adding sand and then finally water. Each time he was able to put something more into the glass. He then addressed the class again: “What great truth does this experiment show us?”

The boldest members of the class answered, “This demonstrates that even when our agenda is completely full, with a bit of good will, we can always add some new endeavor, something else to do.”

“No,” answered the professor. “What the experiment shows is that if one does not put the large stones first in the glass, one will never succeed in making them go in afterward.”

In today’s gospel reading John the Baptist asks us to attend to our “large stones,” those behaviors and areas in our lives that we most need to face with God’s grace. As part of his ministry to prepare the way for Jesus, John had been proclaiming a message of repentance and the advent of the reign of God. When people started coming to him for baptism to signify their renewal and commitment, John challenged them in very strong terms:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God can raise up Children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7-9).

This reflected not only John’s fiery preaching style but even more the urgency of his message and ministry. He realized that his time was short, and he

wanted to make sure that as many people as possible would be ready for the one who was mightier than he and whose sandals he felt unworthy to unfasten.

People from all walks of life were very moved by what John said, and one after the other they came to him asking, “What are we to do?” John’s advice was quite practical, and it forced them to get to “the heart of the matter.” Those people who had two cloaks (a luxury at that time) were urged to give one to those in need. The tax collectors and soldiers who were using the power of their offices to exploit others and benefit themselves were admonished to turn away from corruption. In short, John commanded them all to be more just.

It seems a little too obvious to state, but *if we truly want to change our lives then...we actually have to change our lives!* If we want to lose weight we have to eat less and be more physically active. If we want to get better grades, we have to study more and spend less time watching TV or playing video games. If we want to avoid going into deeper debt—whether in our government or in our homes—we will have to spend less. If we want our Church to be a stronger instrument of evangelization then everyone who is part of the body of Christ—clergy and laity, young and old, men and women—has to commit to being an evangelist in whatever way God has called them and with the gifts God has given them.

So what are some of the “large stones” that you need moved in your life? I asked myself that question, and I found that one of them is addressed in today’s scripture readings: *anxiety*. I worry a lot, and I worry about a lot of things. Some days I feel like coming to Morning and Evening Prayer and even Mass with my Capuchin brothers is a waste of time because my mind is so preoccupied with this situation or that task—with what “I” have to do—that I am deaf to God’s word. If it registers at all, it goes in one ear and out the other.

Then I am confronted with some of the exhortations in today’s scriptures:

- In our first reading: “Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! *The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior;*”
- In our responsorial: “*God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid. My strength and my courage is the Lord.*”
- In our second reading: “*The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.*”

I then realize that so much of my anxiety is tied up in the delusion that it’s all up to me! Of course, it is not. I need to repent of my pride and my need to be “on top of everything.” *That’s God’s job*. If I asked John the Baptist, “What should I do?” he might simply reply, “Heed the scripture that says, ‘Be still before the Lord; wait for God’” (Psalm 37:7). So I’ve started to come to community prayers and Mass a few minutes earlier—to simply be still. It’s not easy. Repentance rarely is. The largest stones, after all, are the hardest to lift. +