

ADVENT, THIRD SUNDAY, C (2009) HOMILY
(Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18)

WE ARE A SMELLY AND LOVING COMMUNITY WAITING FOR CHRIST

As you know, we have formed small church communities here at St. Paul's with about 400 people currently involved in groups. We have seen the abundant fruit of God's grace at work in these groups.

When I was in Zanesville, we also had some awesome small church communities. Eventually, each one took on various forms of service to the wider community. Among other things, my group sponsored an annual Christmas caroling for those who were home-bound. I will never forget the first year that we did this. We had to rent two city buses because of the great response that we received to our invitation to parishioners to be part of the caroling.

We headed out into the beautiful hilly countryside of that part of the state. We were going first to visit some of the poorest folks in the parish. (Remember that Zanesville is in Appalachia!) The very first stop that we made took us to an elderly brother and sister who lived together in very primitive conditions. They also had some dogs. I always was a little uncomfortable going on communion calls to this home because the dogs seemed a little mean. But today, our problem with the dogs was going to be something altogether different. A member of our party did not watch where he was stepping and he dragged some dog do onto one of the buses. This happened to be my bus! Furthermore, it was a fairly cold day and the bus was overheated. Soon, the smell became quite pronounced. We started ribbing this poor guy who had been careless about where he walked. Pretty soon we all were getting the dog do on our shoes because it had stuck to the steps going into the bus. With each stop, more and more people became carriers of the dreaded feces. Soon the bus literally reeked with the stench. The other bus remained unscathed and they forbade any of us from transferring buses. However, the occupants of this second vehicle were soon (by God's loving plan) to participate in our experience.

We stopped at a farm house way, way out in the country. This was the home of the Mom of one of our deacons. When we were ready to leave, the un-smelly bus died. The driver could not get it started. So we were down to one bus. After some discussion of our options – and more ribbing of the original stepper, we decided the best thing to do was for all of us to pile onto the one functioning bus. It was standing room only. And the choristers who had been on the clean bus now began to step in the do and they were no longer able to laugh at the rest of us. Somehow, we finished our caroling in good humor and made it back to the church social hall where we enjoyed a nice warm supper – leaving our shoes outside. We talked about this incident for years.

I have always looked on this experience as a symbol of the church. We are all in this together – and sometimes it's a smelly journey. It's smelly because it's human and we humans make mistakes and commit sins. We step in it a lot and we drag the do around with us a lot too. We contaminate each other. But of course this smelly experience is also a graced one. Christ is with us. He stepped in the do too. It was our do, but he lovingly made it his own because he wanted to share fully in our human life – which smells at times. During Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus into our imperfect and often

stinky world. It is good to remember that he was familiar with this stink from his birth; after all, he was born in a stable.

In the gospel today (from St. Luke), John the Baptist guides people about how to live as a diverse community – a community which has the common desire to repent and to live a new life. What the Baptist says to the crowds who came to be baptized, he is also saying to us who have been baptized and to all Christ's disciples throughout history. He tells us: share some of what we have with the poor; be honest with everyone in our work and our business; respect all people; give others a break; be happy with our blessings. Ultimately, of course, John points us toward Jesus. He says in the gospel that someone more important than he is coming – and this one whose advent we await is a man whose sandals we are not worthy to unfasten. That is, we are not even worthy to be Christ's slave (because it was slaves who unfastened sandals). This same Lord will winnow (or separate) the bad from the good.

But this same Jesus in whose name we have been baptized is on our side. He is on that bus which is a metaphor for the church. He is on that bus that often smells because of the missteps of clergy and laity. He loves us so much that he keeps stepping in our messes in order to be with us to guide us. He is always at our side. He has poured out his grace through the Holy Spirit and he has tried us by fire (as the gospel says). He instructs us on how to be a loving community of believers. Every parish is diverse and St. Paul's is beautifully so. [9:00. Today we give thanks that God is in the process of adding more members to our number through the RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. At this Mass, we will celebrate the dismissal of these folks who will go off to reflect on the readings while the rest of us celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist. These Catechumens and Candidates remind us of how precious is our own faith in the Jesus who burst into our human lives on Christmas.] Our diversity is certainly a cause for joy.

So as the first reading (from the Prophet Zephaniah) invites us, let us shout for joy today! We celebrate on this Third Sunday of Advent "Gaudete Sunday" – the Sunday of rejoicing that Christmas is so near. But as the church teaches and as we know from our lived faith experience, Jesus is always coming into our lives. He is with us to stay (until the end of time, as he promised) and he shows us the way. John the Baptist points us to him and we point each other to him. He is on that crowded bus, he smells what we smell, and the whole stinking mess is headed for glory. So rejoice today! I echo the second reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians when I say it again: Rejoice! The Lord is near! He is sitting next to you and me on the bus to a fuller life – the bus to eternal life!