"Go Home"
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
3rd Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2024
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

In 1960, Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck drove across the United States accompanied by his poodle Charley, and subsequently wrote a book about his adventures entitled *Travels with Charley in Search of America.* Among his many experiences, he described attending church in a small town in Vermont. He admired the simplicity of the service and the no-nonsense approach of the preacher on the reality of sin. With a "delivery like a pneumonic drill," the preacher gave a "glorious fire-and-brimstone sermon" with a graphic description of a "well-stoked, white-hot hell served by technicians of the first order." As the sermon progressed, Steinbeck began "to feel good all over" reflecting that "for some years now God has been a pal to us ... *But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me.* He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it."

Steinbeck perhaps describes the fascination of the crowds in Jesus' time with why they went to hear the harsh message of John the Baptist. He also notes how different the images of God can appear, not just within the entire Bible itself, but within one Sunday's lectionary reading. What a seeming paradox! We have first the God described in the first lesson from the Book of Zephaniah – one of the minor prophets tucked in the back of the Old Testament, his book a mere eight pages long in much of which he speaks of disasters so dire that a modern reader might think only very recent generations could have been threatened by them.

"I will utterly sweep everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord." Humans and animals and the birds of the air.. Merry Christmas to you to, Zepahaniah.

However, these final verses which we heard this morning offer people hope, as Zephaniah describes a vision of a restored Israel. Describes? That's too small a verb, this God bursts into song with joy over God's beloved, like any of our most powerful crooners – Sinatra, Franklin, Bennett, Fitzgerald. This crooning God seems to be across

the table from this harsh, shoot-from-the hip prophet and they trade seemingly competing messages.

Z:I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

J:every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Z:he will rejoice over you with gladness,he will renew you in his love;

J:You brood of vipers

Z:he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

J:but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

All this sounds like recent political debate, like people on two different sides of a long table shouting slogans at each other: "Tastes great" vs. "Less filling" if you want to go back to the 70s.

But maybe these messages aren't as disparate as they seem. We tend to focus more on the appearance and the language of John the Baptist more than his message. Let's dig deeper. People left their homes and traveled far out into the desert to see John expecting something exotic. The great prophet, the guru in the desert. To some degree they got it. His clothing, his radical demeanor. But the message was not what they expected. Did he tell them to climb to the nearest mountain because that's where Moses and Elijah experienced God? No. Did he tell them to stay out in the desert with him, to do a 30-day retreat? No.

The answer he gives them is even more radical than they have language to comprehend — so radical we stand in danger of missing it: What should you do? **You should go home**. Why because sin is a lot like car crashes, over half of them happen within five miles of where we live, with people in our family and community whom we profess to love or care for. Will Willimon says the answer for finding the Kingdom of God is not sitting here in the quiet of our churches, reflecting upon the state of our souls and feeling sad about our peccadilloes. John the Baptist knows that when one is faced with so great and different a Kingdom as this, one must repent, which means to turn round,through deeds as costly, specific and particular as sharing clothing and food.

That's what he tells them. Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your colleagues. Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is far away from the nitty-gritty dailiness of your particular life. Instead of waiting for a holy someday that will never come, inhabit the stuff of your life as deeply and as generously as you can right now. Share now. Be merciful now. Do justice now. **Inhabit your life**, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous, how routine. Why? Because the holy ground that matters most is the ground beneath your feet.

What John is daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the ethereal and mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for salvation we need are embedded in the lives God has already given us. The kingdom of heaven is *here,* within and among us.

What does this mean? It means we have work to do — work so ordinary, it will almost definitely disappoint us. I wonder how those tax collectors felt the next time they headed out to collect money. Wait, God's kingdom is *here?* Here in this hated profession? Here among people who'd just as soon spit in my face as pay me what they owe me? God cares how I live *here?*

Yes. Yes, God cares how we live here.

The Gospel writer calls John's exhortation "good news." And it is. If you've believed in your heart that your life — your family, your heritage, your vocation, your life stage — is outside the purview of God's saving goodness — then what John has to say is good news indeed. Your life is infinitely dear. Nothing in it is beyond redemption. *Nothing.* John's message is actually good news. And the good news is that God is not finished with us yet. Yes, Zephaniah, we are renewed in God's love, and yes, John, we know that there are things in us and in our world that need to be scrubbed away, burned away. We need each day to be authentic, to respond to each other with truth and compassion. The crooning God of Zephaniah is the same God as the Vermont God of John the Baptist. God is near. Rejoice!