Perhaps you noticed that one of our readings for this evening stood out, there was one that was not quite like the others. Our reading from the prophet Zephaniah spoke of being gathered home by God: “At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you together” (3:20). No more will there be disasters, all enemies will be cast out, and fortunes will be restored. Our reading from Isaiah spoke of God becoming our salvation, and so all fear is done away with. “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord GOD is my strength and might, and has become my salvation” (Isaiah 12:2). In our Epistle lesson from Philippians we are told to rejoice always, rejoice in all things. We do not need to worry about anything at all, because, Saint Paul says, “the Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5).

Our Gospel lesson, by comparison, sounds positively frightening. Our Gospel lesson tells us about the message that John the Baptist came preaching. Last week we heard that John the Baptizer is the one who will go before the Messiah, before the Christ, and he will set the stage for Jesus. Pastor Fryer mentioned all of the political rulers of the day: Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod and Philip the tetrarch. But the word of the Lord comes to none of them. The word of the Lord passes by all of the political powers of the day. They will not pave the way of the Lord. Instead, the word of the Lord comes to a wild-eyed, crazy-haired man who lives in the wilderness, who eats nothing but wild honey and locusts.

But to this wild-man, the multitudes flock. They come, not looking to see some sideshow spectacle, they come to hear his words, they come to hear the word of the Lord, and respond by wanting to be baptized. But his response to them is not what one would have expected: “you brood of vipers!” he tells them, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? … Even now,” he goes on to say, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7, 9).

Now the problem with reading passages like this is that our tendency is to think that these words are for someone else. Let me assure you, this is my tendency too. Every other time that I can think of in the gospels when someone is called a brood of vipers, it is the Pharisees, or the scribes. But not here. No one can escape these words from John. For it wasn’t just the Pharisees coming out to be baptized, it was “the multitudes,” the crowd, all of
Israel. Before John the Baptist, the whole lot of humanity is one big brood of vipers, trying to flee the wrath to come. Before John the Baptist, every tree has an axe laid to its root, waiting to cut down all that do not bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

We have before us, then, two jarringly different sorts of messages. Perhaps the question to ask ourselves is this: which message is for us? Which side of this dividing line will we end up on? These are the sorts of questions that are very much Advent questions. For the season of Advent is when we look for Christ’s “coming,” which is what the word advent means. We look to his second coming, his last coming. Jesus comes as the Light of the world; he comes, as we pray in the Vespers service, to scatter the darkness. But what is powerfully shown in our readings throughout Advent, and this evening especially, is that this darkness is in us too. As Pastor Fryer has shown in his two words from the last two Sundays, in Advent we keep before our eyes both the necessity of repentance but also the expectation of redemption. This is not an either-or. And so in the Vespers service, we pray that the Light who is Christ would scatter the darkness, but we immediately afterwards pray that the Church would be illumined. The Church yet sits in darkness, we too sit in darkness, always needing the Light of the world to illuminate and penetrate us.

The end of our Gospel lesson has John the Baptizer telling of this coming Light: “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16–17). He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, he will gather the wheat, but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Again, we might be tempted to ask, who is the wheat, and who the chaff? But in John’s description of Jesus’ Baptism we see that this is the wrong question. When we were baptized, we were baptized with the Spirit of Holiness and with fire. In Baptism, we have already encountered this unquenchable fire. In Holy Baptism we encountered the judgment of God already, we encountered God’s wrath. But we did not do it alone.

One day the sons of Zebedee, James and John, came up to Jesus and said, “grant us to sit, one at your right, one at you left, when you come in your glory” (Mark 10:37). Jesus tells them that they do not know what they are asking for. And then he puts a question to them, “are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the Baptism with which I am baptized?” They answer, that they are able. Jesus does not scold them for this, calling it presumption or arrogance. He tells them, you will drink the cup that I drink, and you will be baptized with my own baptism. When Jesus talks about his
Baptism, he is speaking about his Baptism in blood, he is speaking about his crucifixion. Jesus tells James and John that they will have a share in his Baptism, they will have a share in his cross. Paul says this to us too. In Romans 6 he says, “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (v. 3). In our baptisms, “The old man,” Paul says, “the old adam, was crucified with [Jesus]” (v. 6). In baptism, death and judgment have already been encountered, the wrath of God has already been tasted. But it was not encountered alone, we did so with Jesus. Or rather, his encounter with death and judgment, his baptism in blood, his drinking of the cup of God’s wrath, became ours, truly ours because Christ has become ours.

The comforting word for the first Sunday of Advent was redemption, the word for last Sunday was repentance, and the word for this evening is “rejoice.” In fact, that is what this upcoming Sunday is called, Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word for “rejoice.” It comes from the first word of our Epistle lesson: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). “Gaudete in the Lord always; again I will say, Gaudete.”

With three of our passages, it seems easy to draw this conclusion, rejoice always. But why would the words of John the Baptist about the wrath to come and the unquenchable fire be given for Rejoice Sunday? If this wrath is coming, if the dividing line cuts through each of us so that none of us can say we are without some darkness, none of us can say that we are free from the wrath of God, how can we rejoice at the thought of this?

Today, Michael Cohen, former attorney for President Trump, was sentenced to three years in prison for financial fraud and for other illegal activity. Before his sentencing he gave a speech, admitting to the path of darkness that he had been walking in. But in the face of a prison sentence, he said, “the irony is that today I get my freedom back.” A prison of lies and deceptions, a prison of sin, is much worse than a prison made with hands. When Christ the true and perfect Judge comes, it will be something like that.

Christ comes as Judge, and he comes to free us from our sins. The irony, perhaps, is that above all it is the fire that gives us our freedom back. When we are purged of our sins, when the chaff has been burned away, what will be left? The revealing of glory of the Lord in our very own bodies. When lies are burned away, what is left? Nothing but the truth. When Light comes, darkness will scatter. The darkness in you and in me will be scattered, and there will be nothing left in us but the Light of God. In fact, there will be nothing left in all of creation that is not illuminated by the light of God. For on that day, says Revelation, “they shall see the Lord’s face ... there shall be no..."
night there; they need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light."

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Why do we always rejoice? Saint Paul in the next verse tells us why, “The Lord is near” (v. 5). Rejoice for the Lord is near. The Lord comes to judge the nations, he comes with a winnowing fork in his hand, he comes to burn away the chaff. But this same one, as our Isaiah reading says, “has become [our] salvation.” The one who is coming we have already met in Baptism. The one who is coming we have many times encountered at this table, where we drink the cup that he drank. The one who is coming has spoken to us in his word and continues to speak to us even now. The one who is coming has come many times to us. Therefore, we *gaudete*, we rejoice.

And we can say with the holy prophet Zephaniah,

> “The LORD has taken away the judgments against [us]. ... The King of Israel, the LORD, is in [our] midst” (3:15).

So we will “rejoice and exult with all [our] hearts” (v. 14).

And we say with the holy prophet Isaiah,

> “Surely God is [our] salvation; [we] will trust, and will not be afraid, For the LORD GOD is [our] strength and [our] might, and has become [our] salvation” (12:2).

Amen.