

3rd Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7

Zephaniah 3:14-20. Zephaniah is essentially a gloomy prophecy built around the concept of “The Day of the Lord” but seeing that anticipated day in dark terms. “That day”, the prophet writes, “will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities, and against the lofty battlements” (1:15-16). Both Judah (ch. 1; 3:1-5), and all the nations (ch. 2; 3:6-8) of the world, will know the judgment of God against them. And why? Because “the officials within the city are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law” (3:3-4). Both Israel and the nations will be judged by God and severely punished because they have been unjust toward the poor and have not sought to empower the powerless.

But Zephaniah doesn’t leave his prophecy on a dark note. He promises “Wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms. At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord” (3:8a, 9). And why will God redeem and liberate the nations? Because he will have so worked in the hearts of God’s people that they will witness of God’s love to the world through their actions. “I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord – the remnant of Israel. They shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down and no one shall make them afraid” (3:12-13).

It is in the light of Zephaniah’s proclamation that God will act to save the nations through God’s people that one then reads the Old Testament lesson for the 3rd Sunday in Advent. That lesson is a song of joy sung by all of God’s people from all over the world!

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more” (3:14-15). God is in the midst of the city of Jerusalem (cf. 3:5). But he is also in the midst of his people wherever they may be gathered. He is among them as monarch, protector, the one who deeply cares for each of them and all of them, and thus cares for the world. He has become their God and they God’s people!

But Zephaniah continues. “I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for 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” (3:18-20).

What Zephaniah describes is God’s salvation of Israel and of God’s people scattered around the world. But it is notable how this prophet defines salvation. Salvation is to “remove disaster

from you”, “deal with your oppressors”, “save the lame”, “gather the outcast”, “change shame into praise and renown”, “bring you home”, “restore your fortunes”. Salvation is not presented as being solely spiritual liberation from evil or interior (spiritual) transformation. Salvation is concrete, practical and having to do with the everyday issues of injustice, oppression and marginalization. Consequently, salvation is seen as social as well as spiritual, corporate as well as individual, having to do with justice as well as with righteousness!

There is, however, in this hymn of joy one statement that seems to get at the very heart of Zephaniah’s proclamation of salvation for the remnant of Israel and of God’s people spread throughout the nations of the world. That passage reads, “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival” (3:17).

The phrase that is translated “he will renew you in his love” in the NRSV is likely more accurately translated “he will quiet you by his love” or “quiets you” or “rests you”. The image is one of a baby, freshly fed and now lying peacefully and sated, feeling perfectly safe, loved and at home on his mother’s breast (cf. Psalm 131). That, Zephaniah is saying, is what God will do for us who remain centered in Her and working for Her justice! In the larger context of this prophecy, God is most often envisioned as a Warrior “mighty to save” (1:14). Now, in this passage, Zephaniah is bringing out the feminine, warm, nurturing and caring side of God who cradles those who have formerly been either the rejected of the world or their oppressors. But now God has worked redemptively in oppressor and oppressed alike, has brought them to God’s self, and has thus brought about both within and among them the transformation of the world into the world as God intends it to be. This is the great hope and expectation of Zephaniah!

Isaiah 12:2-6 is another psalm that does not appear in the Psalter. It is a hymn of praise written by the prophet Isaiah.

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.’ Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (12:2-6).

To understand this psalm, one must pay particular attention to one phrase and two words. The phrase is, “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”. The two words are “salvation” and “Yahweh” (in the NRSV, translated as “the Lord”).

The phrase, “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” is particularly intriguing because this immediately reminded the Israelite listener to this hymn of young women gathered around a well, scooping up in its bucket the waters of life (or “salvation”) and chatting and visiting around that well as they worked. This statement has many echoes with other such images in the Old Testament (Num. 21:17-18; Psalms 66:2; 67:2; 105:1; 148:13; Isa. 65:8; Jer. 25:30; 65:8; Zech. 2:10) and has a clear example of this hymn’s theme in Judges 5:11, where the

author writes, “Hark to the women drawing water (at the wells)! It is the victories of Yahweh they commemorate there” (New English Bible). The sense of Isaiah 12:2-6 is of women gathering around the well, attending to the common tasks of daily life but using those tasks as the occasion for celebrating Israel’s deliverance by God (e.g., Exodus 2:15-22).

What is it that these women are celebrating about God? That brings us to the two words used most often in this psalm – the words “salvation” and “Yahweh” (each used three times). Isaiah wrote (and, perhaps, the women sang as they worked), “He is the God of my salvation. I have trust now and no fear, for Yahweh is my strength, my song, he is my salvation. And you will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation” (vss. 2-3, Jerusalem Bible)!

The Hebrew words “salvation” (*yeshua*) and “to save” (*yasha*) means “to have victory in battle” or “to develop without hindrance”. If we are to understand a passage like Isaiah 12, it is important to separate the Hebrew word translated “salvation” from the Christian understanding of “salvation”. When we hear this word, it has purely spiritual associations for us, having to do with the release of our immortal soul from sin and into eternal life. But this was not the meaning of the word in Old Testament Israel, nor exclusively within the New Testament, as well.

In the Old Testament, one who was needing liberation from oppression, deliverance from danger and tyranny, or even rescue from imminent peril was in need of “salvation” (e.g., I Sam. 4:3; 7:8; 9:16). For someone to “save” another not only meant that troubled one’s rescue but also meant the transfer to him by the “savior” of some of his prevailing strength (cf. Job 26:2) so that the “saved” one becomes more self-reliant. Of course, the only one in Israel powerful enough to bring victory, security or freedom to another – even the king – was Yahweh (Ps. 98:1; Job 40:14; Ps. 20:5-9). That recognition was the reason why in Isaiah’s psalm for today, the words “salvation” and “Yahweh” are in such close juxtaposition, for salvation for the nation, the village or the people will not happen apart from God!

This more ancient usage of the word is still reflected in the New Testament in such emphases as salvation meaning deliverance from specific ills, captivity, disease, demon possession or even physical death (Matt. 9:21; Luke 8:36; Matt. 8:28; Acts 27:20; Heb. 2:15). Therefore, it is only in later usage of both Old and New Testaments that salvation became increasingly understood in terms of spiritual deliverance, whereas it was originally seen as physical, political, social and economic rescue (as clearly demonstrated in Exod. 2:15-22 and in the “psalm” of Isaiah 12 for the Third Sunday in Advent).

Therefore, what Isaiah is declaring in his “psalm” is that Yahweh is Israel’s ultimate “savior” who will deliver them from physical, political, social, economic and spiritual troubles – whether those troubles are caused by Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders, by kings and generals and armies of other nations or even by the way Israelites treat each other. And the young women, gathering around the wells and collecting the water for their households that day, sing of such deliverance and of the continuing protection and sustenance of Yahweh for them and for their families, tribes and communities!

Luke 3:7-18. As we developed in last Sunday's gospel lesson, John the Baptist required three actions on the part of all those who responded to his teaching. First, John called on his listeners to repent of their acceptance of life lived under political oppression, economic exploitation and religious domination, as they cooperated with the "powers that be" (just getting along). Second, he required them to be baptized as a symbolic action that declared that they had repented of their embrace of the standards of the powers, and their commitment to truly become "Jews" (as God would define it) for the first time. Third, once they had repented and made their confession of resolve through baptism, they were to begin practicing God's shalom community of justice, sharing of wealth and commitment to one another and God. They are to put their daily actions where their confession of sin and repentance has been! It is in the light of John's call to Israel in Luke 3:1-6 that this prophet then moves on in his call to the people. And that further call appears in our Gospel lesson for today.

"Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:8-9).

What does it mean to be an authentic follower of God, working to realize God's intentions for society? Being an authentic follower of God doesn't mean that you can trace your lineage back to Abraham, John is declaring. You don't demonstrate relationship with God through a paternity test! The test is not whether Abraham is your blood ancestor. The test is whether your character and behavior is consistent with Abraham's! Like Abraham, do you give hospitality to strangers, care for the poor, work justly for all, have such deep faith in God that you will obey God no matter God's demand upon you?

In other words, what John the Baptist is saying to his Jewish listeners is, "God is not finally interested in whether you come here and repent of the ways you have acted unjustly toward your neighbors by cooperating with the powers that be. Nor is God finally interested in you symbolizing your repentance by being baptized. What God wants to see is whether you consistently live out what you proclaimed today you would be about. God will judge you by your actions, not by your intentions! What God wants is men and women, youth and children who will demonstrate their love of God and each other by working for justice for their neighbor and even the alien and helpless among them, who will share their wealth and who will concretely work to free all this nation's people from poverty."

Luke concludes 3:7-9 by having John say, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:9). In other words, what John is saying to the people can be best expressed in that African American statement, "I'm not messing with you, you hear?" God's not messing with you, John is telling the people. God heard your words of repentance. God saw you getting baptized. Now God's going to watch you – and He had better see some evidence that you're not just all talk!

What Luke thus far reports John as proclaiming is consistent with the Gospels of Matthew (3:7-10), Mark (1:4-8) and John (1:19-28). But then Luke adds a section to John's testimony that appears only in the Gospel of Luke.

“And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages’” (3:10-14).

What is significant here is that what Luke is interested in presenting about John is that he not only calls the ordinary people to responsible action (John’s three points above and in last Sunday’s gospel lesson). John calls the people to concrete and specific action. It is to the crowds, tax collectors and soldiers to whom he speaks. And he calls them to very specific and concrete action. They are not to simply work for justice; they are to “share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise”. He doesn’t simply call them to battle poverty and work for equitable economic distribution. He tells them to “collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (i.e., don’t try to make an undue profit), “do not extort money from anyone”, “if you have two coats, give one to a person who has none”, “be satisfied with your wages”. John is being intensely practical and concrete, rather than theoretical and conceptual. To John, the people’s faith must be lived out in very concrete and specific actions – or it is no faith at all!

The specific and concrete actions that John calls upon those who have repented and been baptized to practice are threefold. First, they are to be compassionate in working for justice for others; they must really care about the poor (“share coats, share food”). Second, they are to be both intentionally ethical and just in their actions, not just helping people out (“don’t collect more money than prescribed”, “do not extort”). Third, they are to be content with the amount of wealth they have accumulated and not lust after more (“be satisfied with your wages”). What John is interested in (and so is Luke) is justice and equality, practically acted out.

A final point in 3:10-14 is the people that Luke intentionally chooses to interact with John. The first are the “crowds” – meaning the ordinary peasants of Israel. That is a general designation. But then Luke chooses to single out two specific groups of people -- tax collectors and soldiers. What is significant about both of these groups is that they had both the capacity to be eminently fair or to use their position to prey upon the people. Tax collectors were Jews appointed by Rome to collect the taxes, but they could name their own price, pay the taxes out of what they had collected and legally keep the remainder for themselves. Being a tax collector could be very profitable, to such a degree that it was rare to hear of an honest tax collector. Likewise, soldiers would use their position of authority to intimidate people and to accept bribes and payments from them. Both professions provided an ideal way to become wealthy at the expense of the people.

It is intriguing that Luke singles out these two professions, and points out that faithfulness to God is indicated by how one uses his money – a major theme of Luke (as we will later see). So he tells tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (in other words, “Don’t try to make a profit off the vulnerability of the people; charge them the legislated amount you are supposed to charge them and not the exorbitant charges other tax collectors charge; be content with making a modest profit”). And John tells the soldiers, “Do not extort money, but be

satisfied with your wages” (in other words, “Don’t use your position to so intimidate people that you can make extra money for yourself; instead, seek to be just toward the people”).

Luke finally concludes John’s message with words that are almost identically repeated in Matthew (3:11-12), Mark (1:7-8) and John (1:24-28). Luke writes, “As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (3:15-17).

John’s preaching and call to repentance has been such a powerful experience to the people, and his willingness to confront the principalities and powers of Israel and Rome so integral to that call to repentance, that the people wonder whether he is the Messiah. He quickly disabuses them of this perspective, telling them that he is “not even worthy to untie the thong of his sandals” (a job for a servant). He is simply “the messenger” (cf. Mal. 3:1-4; Zeph. 3:14-20) sent to announce Messiah’s coming. This coming “messenger of the covenant” will not simply baptize the people with water; he will baptize them with “the Holy Spirit and fire” (that is, with a baptism that will lead to the refinement of the people into what God intends them to be, and which will actually empower the people in their work for God’s intentions for the world).

John states that he is like the farm worker who sweeps the threshing floor after the chaff has been separated from the wheat. This coming One, on the other hand, will be the one who will bring judgment upon Israel’s political, economic and religious systems as to whether they have been faithful or not to God’s intentions for Israel (to be a relational culture of political justice, economic equity and the elimination of poverty). And He will bring judgment as well upon the ordinary people who either worked to be just, caring and content with life (see vv. 10-14 above) or who were intimidated, seduced or cooperated with the systems in their domination of the people. Thus, this Messianic Coming One will separate the chaff from the wheat (the “sheep from the goats” – Mt. 25:31-46) – those of both high position and low who served their own lust for power, wealth, domination or survival, or who served God by truly serving humanity!

Philippians 4:4-7. Much that Paul has previously written in the letter to the Philippians has been anxiety provoking. He himself has written them from prison (1:12-30) where he is awaiting execution. And he has been motivated to write to them, not only preparing them for his coming death, but also to prepare them for the intense persecution he knows will soon be launched against the church by the Roman authorities. He knows that many of them will suffer and even be killed for their faith.

Paul has used himself as an example of how the Philippian Christians should live (3:7-11), when he writes that for Christ’s sake, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”, telling them that all that he wants is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death”. Most importantly, Paul has held up to these Christians the humility of Jesus (2:6-11) as a

model to them of the suffering they will likely experience. “Being found in human form, Christ humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him.”

It is in the light of this morbid but realistic report that Paul sounds the call to joy. Even though he is in jail and is awaiting execution, knowing that his beloved Philippian Christians will also face persecution, suffering and death, his letter resounds with the call to joy. In fact, the word “joy” is used sixteen times in this letter. That joy, Paul tells the Philippian Church, is grounded in the peace of God he has and they need to have, for that is the perfect antidote to fear. Paul writes,

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say: Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4-7).

Paul calls on the Philippian Christians to “rejoice always. Again I say, “Rejoice”. Paul in essence differentiates between joy and happiness. Happiness is the result of life or some elements of life going well for you. Joy, on the other hand, is an emotion you choose to hold onto, irrespective of the good or evil that is happening within your life or life together as God’s people. Happiness can happen only when things go well. Joy can occur even in the midst of conflict, anxiety and adversity. The reason why is that happiness is based upon favorable circumstances, while joy results from the sustaining and loving relationship we have with God, even in the midst of difficulties. Therefore, Paul calls upon the Philippian Christians who are facing Paul’s death and their own persecution by Rome to claim joy for their lives, not happiness!

“Do not worry about anything”, Paul writes, because being anxious is incompatible with trusting in God. Instead, submerge your life in prayer in which supplication is balanced with thanksgiving. And such centering in prayer will bring God’s peace upon you that “surpasses all understanding”. Such peace is the direct answer to your prayers. It is not that your prayers will rescue you from the persecution or suffering that is to come. Rather, those prayers will equip and enable you to go through that suffering centered on Christ and consequently will be filled with God’s peace. It will be God’s peace that “will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”, no matter what you face! Thus, Paul has prepared the Philippian Christians to face all that the political oppression, economic exploitation and the Roman culture of domination and control can throw at them. And because these Christians center themselves in the joy and peace of Christ, there is no way they can be defeated!

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