

Third Sunday of Advent
First Trinity Lutheran Church
Zephaniah 3:14-20
December 16, 2012

Brokenness today-Restoration Tomorrow

What do you know about the Book of Zephaniah? Probably not much if anything and that is Ok. Zephaniah is what we call one of those Minor Prophets as compared with Isaiah who was a major prophet. The book of Zephaniah is only three chapters long. Way back in ancient Israel during the days when King Josiah ruled from 640 to 609 B.C., there lived a prophet named Zephaniah. He preached a series of prophetic warnings to the people of Israel about the coming Day of Judgment. He confronted his fellow citizens charging them with the sins of corruption and idolatry. When they went into God's temple, they had forgotten what they were they for. Guilty of the sin of idolatry, they had thought they could enter heaven not by the main doors but by other entrances, worshipping other gods.

The times were awful. God's people followed gods of the surrounding nations. People believed that in order to be safe from invasion by other countries, they should worship the gods of those countries, and in turn, that would offer them security now and in the hereafter. Not so, said the prophet Zephaniah! There was only One God, the True God, and all of these other gods must be abandoned. According to Zephaniah, Israel was on a collision course with God's wrath and judgment, which would bring them punishment, death and disaster. Unless they would repent of their sins, and turn with all of their heart, mind, and soul back to the LORD God, they were doomed. It was a difficult message, a very sober message, and a message that was difficult both to preach and to hear.

Then, all of a sudden, these proclamations of doom and gloom stopped and the book of Zephaniah ends with today's first reading, which is a hymn of joy and restoration. Even though the consequences of Israel's sin must be suffered; nonetheless, Zephaniah sees the

day when the LORD with his gift of restoration will bless a remnant of God's people. The prophet says: "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you." God's anger and punishment did not last forever. God offers Israel his love and delivers them from their suffering.

With the celebration of the season of Advent it is important that we don't get caught up in our culture's annual self-indulgent plunge into the excesses of today. Our culture, insofar as it is even familiar with the word "advent," seeks to collapse it into the season of Christmas. But letting the season of Advent remain Advent and refusing to collapse it into the season of Christmas is important. It is not just that we want to spoil everyone's desire to get an early start on celebrating Christmas. No, on the contrary, it promises truly to let Christmas be Christmas and have its joy be grounded on something more permanent and enduring.

Just when we thought we could turn Advent into Christmas, in rushes John the Baptist. Dressed in his animal skins, munching on locusts and wild honey, and screaming, "You brood of vipers!" he is not the kind of guy you want to have come to your holiday party. The Christian lectionary during the season of Advent is dominated by the imposing and disturbing figure of John the Baptist. He is about as far from jolly old Saint Nick as you could imagine. His abrasive appearance in our Advent Gospel readings is intended to remind us that, if there is a reason to rejoice during this season, it is not because life is good, and all is well, and God bless America!

On the contrary, this fiery prophet reminds us that all is not well and that we had better stop pretending that all is well. There is all this talk of the fiscal cliff, and if something is not done soon there will be financial trouble for many people. We know from a world perspective the situation especially in the Middle East, corrupt governments and dictators are

being overthrown by civil war at the expenses of thousands of lives. And here again in American gun violence in an elementary school in Connecticut says that all is not well. All is not well when there have been 16 mass shootings this year alone in America. Even personally you are told that your medical test shows cancer, or there is blood in your body where it shouldn't be, or the pink slip is on your desk when you arrive to work in the morning. If we are to be joyful in this season of Advent, if we are to be joyful in any season, What is the basis of our hope? The fiery and disturbing words of John the Baptist insist that it can't possibly be now because now is still so flawed and so far from perfection. The four-week season of waiting we call Advent refuses to let us give into our culture's mad rush to turn Christmas into a month-long celebration of excess. It reminds us that the source of our joy can't possibly be the blessings of today. Lifeline players have pointed out, and rightly so that our joy is not in money, food, or presents.

Like the prophet Zephaniah before him, John the Baptist calls our attention to the One who is coming. Zephaniah did the same thing when he called his hearers to look away from the destruction of the moment and the rubble of Jerusalem to the future, to the coming Day of the Lord, when at last everything would be set right for God's people.

That day of liberation and deliverance, that Day of the Lord, finally did come -- in Jesus. Jesus, the Immanuel, the "God with us," came to suffer the shame, the humiliation, the failure, the sin, the rejection that has always plagued God's people and us. In Jesus, God suffered "for us" and "with us." During Advent we are reminded that the reason for our joy lies not in the blessings of today but in the One who is coming. Again Advent reminds us that today is so broken that our hope must come from someplace else, from someone else. Christmas celebrates that this one has come. Jesus has carried with him to the cross

everything that is wrong with today and suffers the consequences. Everything that is wrong has been defeated

The season of Advent also reminds us that we now live "between the times." The Day of the Lord has come in Jesus. God's enemies have been defeated. But all is still not yet accomplished. We now live in the "not yet" waiting for that Last Day when Jesus will "come again" to complete finally the victory that he began at his birth. .

It reminds me of being up early in the morning just before sunrise. It is still dark. But as I begin to see the first rays of light begin to illuminate the horizon, I am certain that the sun will soon appear and a new day will begin. I now live in joyful and certain anticipation of what is to come. I live, you live "between the times" of night and dawn.

It is like waiting for the airplane to arrive. The runway is still empty, but you know that the plane is on time and it will soon be touching down. You live in joyful anticipation of the arrival of your loved one. You live "between the times."

Because of the One who came and who will come, we should have our eyes open to see how Jesus continues to come in the present. Words that sound ordinary and human now are heard as God's Word. Ordinary bread and wine, simple water from a faucet, now are "the means of grace," and are part of the very tools God uses to heal and redeem this world. Even in the midst of tragedy and suffering we can rejoice now, not because we are naive and foolish but because the basis of our joy is what God has done in Christ.

So on this third Sunday in Advent, Zephaniah speaks the LORD's words of restoration, embracing us with the promise of fulfillment as we wait for with joy and hope the second coming of Jesus our Emmanuel. No one can take the presence of God away from us. Christ is with us so we can live with joy, knowing, and trusting that we are secure in his arms no matter what troubles, sufferings, sorrows or hardships we face. Amen.