

Zephaniah 3:14-20 3 Advent 12.12.24 Bill Uetrict

Have you ever had an experience with someone that caused you to say, “Man, I wouldn’t have expected that from her. I wouldn’t have anticipated those kinds of words from him or that kind of action from her. I have—sometimes, frankly, to my own shame. My anticipation of how someone is going to act or speak has closed me off from what he or she can truly offer me.

I’ve got to be honest. I am generally closed off from the prophet Zephaniah. For the most part, he is a real crab. Can I quote him to you?

I, [God], will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. I will sweep away humans and animals. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth.

And if that isn’t enough, how about this?

I will bring such distress upon people that they will walk like the blind. Because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured like dust, and their flesh like dung.

Somebody ought to give this guy a good shot of whiskey, some tickle therapy or some time spent with Joel Osteen. And frankly, this is the way he writes throughout his book . . . until what we receive in today’s first reading. Who would have expected Zephaniah to get so happy? Did he finally get some good meds?

Nope. I don’t think so. This seventh-century B.C.E prophet has been given a new word to speak. The one who has just spent time condemning the enemies of Israel and Israel itself for their lack of justice, for their complacency, for their corrupt leaders, now says that God has issued a pardon. Listen to the prophet:

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. Do not fear, O Zion. Do not let your hands grow weak.

The Lord your God is in your midst; he will rejoice  
over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.

The God who was ticked off with you is now throwing a party for you. He is not just inviting *you* to be joyful. He himself is ebullient, effusive, extravagant with joy over you. Who would have expected that news, those words? But this is what you get when you deal with the God of the Bible.

Oh, I know. Israel must have finally repented, finally got their act together, right? Well, I hate to say, but there is no evidence for that. The prophet Jeremiah who comes after Zephaniah is going to complain that Israel still is an unjust place. Ezekiel is going to say the same thing. But for some reason, God has changed God's mind. And by the way, that happens throughout the scriptures. It's the overarching, repetitive story. God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is gracious.

And it is God's grace that leads to God's joy. Hear God singing. Hear him laughing. Watch him party. And the party is being thrown for you and me. Now I know that many of us are a bit suspicious of joy. You don't want to get too happy, you know. You can get too worked up over things. But it is God who is getting worked up today. He is exulting over you with loud singing, as on a day of a festival. Joy, expressive joy, is the right move today.

In the tradition of the church, this day is known as the Gaudete Sunday. The word "gaudete" means rejoicing. It was a day in the early church set aside in Advent for the faithful to be given a break from all the seriousness of the season. Advent was viewed as a penitential time, a time for repentance and fasting. On Gaudete Sunday, you didn't need to fast. You rejoiced. Advent, like Lent, was viewed as a somber time. But joy also was considered the right spirit for the season. Why?

Because as Paul says, the Lord is near. Why? Because as Zephaniah indicates, the Lord has taken away his judgments against us.

Charley Mabrey, a member of the church I served in Toledo, often would say to me after I had gotten real worked up in a sermon “You got happy today, pastor.” Well, get happy today! Lose yourself in the joy that God has for God’s people.

Now, I have to wonder how all of this joy talk coincides with the message of John the Baptist in Luke’s gospel today. Let’s be frank, or let’s be John; there doesn’t seem to be much joy in John’s proclamation. Didn’t he get the memo that today is joy day? Well, perhaps! He does sound a little like the crabby Zephaniah I expected to hear from today. He calls the crowds a “brood of vipers”, children of snakes. He is quite harsh in saying that “even now the ax is lying at the root of the root of the trees.” He seems a bit judgmental in saying that Jesus’ winnowing shovel is in his hands, preparing him to divide the wheat from the chaff. Where is the joy in all of that?

Without a doubt, John is a prophet of repentance. Like Zephaniah, he notes that there is a lot wrong with the world, that life lived in light of the God of the universe has expectations. And let’s face it. Expectation can be daunting. It can be scary.

But are joy and repentance exclusive from each other? Is John simply a killjoy? Did he not read the end of Zephaniah? Does he fail to understand the message of Paul who thinks that joy is so important to the life of Christian community that he urges the Philippians twice to rejoice. “Rejoice and again I say, rejoice.”

I would agree with Richard Rohr that John in many ways is an “incomplete prophet.” He doesn’t get it all right. Listen to what the Bible says: “I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” And John himself tells us that he is an incomplete prophet: “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.” In other words, John knows that he ain’t the main deal.

Frankly, I think John was wrong about Jesus. Yes, Jesus and his ministry revealed some horrible things about people, particularly about those who are in charge. Yes, he created a crisis for all of us in terms of our response or lack thereof to divine love. But Jesus’ ministry was not fundamentally about dividing the chaff and the wheat. Paul, who today in Philippians is calling us to great joy, saw in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that which brings people together, unifies us all, unveils a grace that has been God’s way (*modus operandi*) from the beginning.

John may have been wrong about what Jesus’ ministry would become, but I don’t think he was wrong about repentance. I don’t believe that the kind of joy that we are being called to today is a joy void of truth telling, absent the call to change and move in new directions. In fact, I think that the joy that is our gift today is beckoning us to live different lives. And I believe John is giving us great direction for what that difference might look like.

“And the crowds asked him: ‘What should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two tunics, two sets of underwear, should share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’” In a culture in which the average American has 19 pairs of shoes and 148 pieces of clothing, (numbers that probably are vastly understated for many of us), we are reminded that life is more about sharing than it is about clinging to or hoarding. John is inviting us to repent from the need to define and protect ourselves by how much we have. He is inviting us to let go, to give. By the way, there is much joy, fun, and freedom to be discovered in letting go. How much of our lives is shaped by the anxiety we have over money and possessions?

Even the hated tax collectors asked John what they should do. And he said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you.” In other words, quit ripping people off. Turn from your tendency to take advantage of people, especially the vulnerable. Learn what it means to be satisfied. Don’t allow yourself to be taken over by systems that feed off people and their defenselessness. I must be honest in wondering what this might say today to our health care systems and the corporate interests that dominate them.

And even the hated (not heroic) soldiers asked John what they should do, and he said: “Do not extort money from anyone.” In other words, don’t terrorize people. Don’t use your power to manipulate them. Repent from power mongering. Repent from manipulation. Use your power to help people, not scare them.

John is straight forward. He doesn’t mince words. His call is for the radical reorientation of our lives. His call is for us to live in light of God’s love and justice.

And I don’t think that call is a matter of diminishing joy. In fact, I sense that it is a matter of increasing joy. Sin sometimes may seem like fun, but ultimately it kills joy. Clinging to everything, resisting generosity, living life on the basis of control doesn’t bring joy. It makes us crabby and angry.

And what’s more, joy that doesn’t make room for all at the party of God is no joy at all. Remember that it is “joy to the **world**; the Lord is come.” When all aren’t included, it isn’t joy to the world, but an exclusive private party for the well-off and the powerful. And that may be fun for some, but it certainly is not the party God is throwing.