

“From Judgment to Joy”

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The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Today we lit two the two purple candles for hope and peace that were lit in our preceding weeks. And then, the pink candle was lit. The pink candle is light and cheerful, symbolizing the rejoicing we feel at being half-way through the season of repentance, penitence, and self-examination in preparation for the arrival of Christ Jesus that Advent invites us to do.

Did any of you see the luminaria all around Monument Square lit up last night? It was beautiful . . . and potentially a powerful symbol. I found myself thinking, wouldn’t it be wonderful if, in future years and the event becomes a town tradition, our church could help to do more than just make it a beautiful artistic display? How do you think the wider community of Hollis might respond if we found an invitational, non-pushy, non-confrontational way to share the meaning we find in the symbolism of light—and lights—shining in the darkness? I’m just wondering about it, pondering it.

Because so much of what’s going on in our country and in the world seems to be bathing us in . . . Abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by national and community leaders, as much as terrorism and fear-mongering, dehumanizing and demonizing as a way of coping with our collective anxiety has cast long shadows over our world. It is right that we take a few weeks to really reflect deeply, to recognize the state of the world we live in, contribute to, and acknowledge our need for a Savior.

In the ancient world, it was very commonly believed that God was present with people only during the ‘good times’. Experiences of blessing, abundance, prosperity, and victory were taken as signs of God being with the people. Times of poverty or hardship were indications that God was not pleased and therefore was giving the people the cold shoulder.

In our first lectionary reading, the prophet Zephaniah wrote to a people who believed that their defeat by the Assyrians was a divine punishment for a whole raft of sins committed by Jerusalem and Judah, including the corruption of their religious leaders, widespread idolatry, and the accommodation of religious beliefs and practices from other traditions into their own. Prior to the verses we heard, the majority of Zephaniah’s three-chapter oracle is, in fact, an excoriating diatribe against the people of Israel. Those of you who’ve been here for the past several weeks will have heard me say similar things about the messages some of the other prophets we’ve heard from brought to their people.

In today’s text, Zephaniah warns that God was getting ready to destroy everything; that nothing they cherished would be left; there would be much lamenting and wailing; families would be torn apart; their wealth would be plundered and their houses laid waste; there would be much distress, devastation, and anguish. Listen to how Chapter 3 begins: “Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God. . . . Therefore 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, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed.” (Zeph. 3:1, 8)

No one and nothing could save them from the Lord’s wrath. And it wasn’t hard for them to believe, because they’d been experiencing firsthand the very hell-on-earth reality Zephaniah described by the time this writing circulated. It was a very different tone than the one set by the Paul, the evangelist and apostle of Jesus Christ—the one who did so much for the early Church in terms of establishing and encouraging the first fledgling Christian communities to remain strong by rejoicing in spite of the threats that beset them.

Deborah Block, a Presbyterian minister from Milwaukee, WI, maintains: “*The prophet is as much the voice of Advent as is the evangelist. Why? [Because] Prophets say what no one wants to hear, what no one wants to believe. Prophets point in directions no one wants to look. They hear God when everybody else has concluded God is silent. They see God where nobody else would guess that God is present.*”¹

These days, we get a little uncomfortable thinking or talking too much about divine judgment. Why is that, do you think?

My observation is that most people spend a good deal of time sizing up and judging others—and with the rising influence of social media, it seems to me that harsh, unkind, and overly explicit expression of these assessments are somehow becoming the accepted norm. Lamentably, instead of establishing the high road, many of our political and religious leaders across the spectrum are setting appalling examples on this score.

For some reason, we generally don’t enjoy it when we find ourselves the object of other peoples’ judgment. Partly, I’m sure, because most of us know our own faults and foibles—and when it comes to things we do that are detrimental to others or to the earth, it’s often easier to overlook the destructive habits in ourselves (and hope others will, too) than it is to change them.

And that reality can contribute to the fear or anxiety most of us feel about the judgment we know we deserve—whether from God, or from those whom we’ve hurt or wronged. But the role of the prophets in our Advent reflections is to help us look at those parts of ourselves that are easier left ignored, so that we might repent and believe in the One who came *for us as one of us*. We’ll never fully appreciate the gift of the sweet, vulnerable baby in the manger, if we cannot first acknowledge our need for him.²

Rev’d. Block has a good deal more wisdom on this in her commentary. Continuing in her explanation about how and why prophetic voices are important to us in Advent, she writes, “*Prophets feel God’s compassion for us, God’s anger with us, God’s joy in us. They dream God’s dreams and utter wake-up calls; they hope God’s hopes and announce a new future; they will God’s will and live it against all odds. Prophets sing God’s song and sometimes interrupt the program with a change of tune.* [For those who recall my challenge of last week, for each of us to be prophets to our world today, these might be both daunting and inspiring words of challenge for us.]

¹ Deborah Block, *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Vol. 1, p. 52.

² Kathy Beach-Verhey, *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Vol. 1, p. 69.

Zephaniah's song calls people to lament and repent. Jerusalem is idolatrous and complacent; the nations are corrupt. God is indignant. . . . [But suddenly, at the end of the day], God's promised salvation interrupts a tirade of judgment with a song of joy. The 'day of darkness and gloom' (1:15) is supplanted by a day of gladness.

"Zephaniah, thank God, knows the future and wants us to get up and rejoice! The future will be different from the present and even different from the future that had been foreseen. . . . Why do we listen to the prophets during Advent? Because centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ they were messengers of essential good news: "Do not fear. . . The LORD, your God, is in your midst." The prophet teaches the evangelist a basic phrase in the language of God, and again the prophetic word is a pastoral word, spoken into the heart of human experience."³

In Luke's gospel, the words, "Do not be afraid" are repeated to several unsuspecting recipients of God's news. Old Zechariah hears it (Luke 1:13) before he's informed that he and his elderly wife Elizabeth will become parents to John the Baptist; and then Mary (1:30), before she is startled by the news that she will bear the Son of God; and then the shepherds, who hear that the angels are bringing "good news of great joy" (2:10). In Matthew's gospel, the ladies hear the refrain when they go in search of Jesus' body at the tomb: "Do not be afraid. . . He is not here, for he has been raised." (28:5-6)

*"[So,] Zephaniah and Luke join voices in [this] persistent biblical refrain. 'Do not fear' is repeated over and over again because human beings are afraid of many things. Read between the lines that follow in Zephaniah 3:16-20, and we read our own souls: We fear that God is not in our midst and that the enemies of good and of God are winning. . . . We fear insignificance, doubting that we matter in the course of events and dreading that we will be crushed by them. We fear political defeat and natural disaster. We fear shame and reproach, that our faults and foibles will be discovered and render us less than the person we had fooled ourselves and others into thinking we were. We are afraid that we won't have enough, won't be enough. We even fear that God may keep God's promises, and interrupt the safety of our fears and the familiarity of our enemies with something new." But to all of this, the divine response is, "Do **not** be afraid." The pastoral word from Zephaniah that served as our first lesson this morning acknowledges our fear and dispels it with a promise of transforming joy and not a threat of judgment.⁴*

We live in a world that seems in many ways to have lost all connection with any sort of moral compass: there seems to be little sense of accountability, or appreciation for the ways in which our short-sighted and *self*-centered behaviors destroy the wholeness God desires in and out of our relationships with others, with the world, and with God. In many ways, I think, the consequences of our actions and our *failure to act* represent the divine judgment.

Mercifully, there is an indomitable new shoot of life, transformation and renewal that inevitably emerges even from the rubble of our destructive ways. And this, too, represents the divine judgment: that we are worth saving, even pitching tent with, becoming one of us.

Theologically, we have grown in our understanding from the ancient days when people believed that God showed displeasure by disappearing from the midst of the people. Today, we

³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴ Ibid., p. 52, 54.

know that God is *always* with us—no matter where we go, or what we do. Zephaniah proclaimed it to his people, exulting: ‘The LORD, your God, is in your midst’ (3:17a). And Jesus Christ showed us how to recognise the signs of God’s accompaniment with us, how to honor God’s faithful presence in all times and places, even in those times and places that seem consumed by utter darkness. The apostle Paul encourages us to respond to it by rejoicing always, letting our gentleness be known to everyone; not worrying about anything, but instead going to God in prayer.⁵

During these days of Advent, when the waning hours of sunlight seem to be a sign of the growing darkness of our times, we are called to look for the light: for signs of God’s faithful presence. In a fashion that I thought was beautifully suggested in the symbolism of a thousand luminaries lighting the way around our town square last night, we are called to *be* signs of that faithful presence and light in a world shrouded in shadows, by rejoicing in the Lord always; by letting our gentleness be known to everyone; by overcoming our worries with prayers of thanksgiving and supplication.

We can only do that when we recognize the ways in which we fall short individually, and collectively; when we repent; and when we welcome the Light of the World, and allow the Savior to do divine work in and through us.

And when we do—what joy and peace! Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Philippians 4:4-5