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Weekend of Sunday, December 12, 2021

3rd Sunday of Advent/Year C

First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

Gospel Reading: Luke 3:7-18

Sermon Title: “Hope for Those Who are Watching”

Theme

Christ’s presence in our midst in the wonder of the holy supper is cause for singing. The nearness of the God in prayer, in every circumstance, is cause for rejoicing. The coming of one “more powerful” than John, even with a winnowing fork in hand, is good news—and cause for exultation—for us who are being saved. Great joy is the tone for the third Sunday of Advent.

Texts:

First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵The 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.

¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷The 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
¹⁸as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹I 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.

²⁰At 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.

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

¹⁴Soldiers 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.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.”

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Sermon

Watching is the word of the day this third week of Advent. Though not as obvious as *weary* was last weekend, I see it throughout the liturgy and readings for this weekend.

Zephaniah is one of the last books of prophecy in the Old Testament but Zephaniah was actually an early prophet among the prophets; he ministered between 640-609 BCE. By that time, the northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians and Judah remained a vassal kingdom under the Assyrians, but an even more brutal enemy was on the horizon, the evil Babylonians.

The book of Zephaniah begins with strong words of judgment

- against the priests who have been worshiping or allowing the worship of other gods;
- against officials and the king's sons pandering to foreign tastes; and
- against the wealthy who care only for their needs and not the needs of the poor.

These evils contribute to making Judah's capital Jerusalem a defiled oppressing city.

The entire book of Zephaniah is very short and begins with strong words of judgment against those responsible for leading the people astray. However, God knew Zephaniah wouldn't be listened to if he only spoke of judgment and condemnation, so at the end of the book of Zephaniah we have the passage that is our First Reading, and in it Zephaniah foretold of a time of joy for Judah. If they listen to his words of judgment, repent and turn from their evil ways, then God's salvation will be at hand.

Specifically in this passage, Zephaniah saw a vision of a day when the Judahites will be able to watch and see that God is coming to them. That God will be

- in their midst;
- turning away their enemies;
- removing disaster from them;

- dealing with their oppressors;
- removing their shame;
- making them a people renowned and worthy of praise;
- and restoring their fortunes.

Their role in preparing for God's intervention is to return to faithfulness, to trust God as the sole guarantor of their security. They clearly weren't there while Zephaniah was prophesying, but that is his role, to be God's mouthpiece casting a vision of a better day. Of course, that never happened. As a nation, Judah had periods of faithfulness, but just like people, they returned to sin.

Over the next 600 years, Judah's overlords went:

- from the Assyrians to the Babylonians,
- from the Babylonians to the Persians,
- from the Persians to the Greeks, and
- from the Greeks to the Romans.

And it was into a Roman-controlled Judah that John the Baptist entered the scene. His story continues from last week as this week's Gospel Reading from Luke.

With a similar tone, John the Baptist came out of the wilderness and onto the Judean scene with a message of condemnation and warning. "You brood of vipers! Do you think you will be saved from the coming condemnation because you call yourselves children of Abraham? Repent and bear good fruit, or be thrown into the fire and destroyed!"

People came from miles around. As I have said before, he was the best show in town. He was singularly focused, no one was spared from his condemnation, and as a result, even the Jewish religious leadership and Herod himself respected him.

John's message, like Zephaniah's, came with an out. To his fiery words of condemnation, the people cried out in fear, "What then shall we do?" John simply replied that they should live godly lives, and to be more specific, he gave them a list of behaviors our mothers taught us:

- share,
- be generous,
- be fair,
- tell the truth,
- be satisfied with what you have.

It's not rocket science, yet look at the headlines today and watch for yourselves how these simple characteristics are ignored, but I digress.

John's real mission was to be the forerunner to the LORD and his message was to prepare the way. "Messiah is coming! Be ready! Keep watching!"

Notice that John's words recorded in Luke, like Zephaniah's words, might be characterized as threatening and frightening. So Luke, like Zephaniah, ended the passage with, ¹⁸"So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." "Good news?" Did John's fiery exhortations sound and feel like good news? I suppose it depends on how one responds to them.

Did the people change their ways and prepare for the coming of God's Messiah? Generally, the answer is "no". Jesus was not recognized as their Messiah, and Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they wanted.

Jesus was not the kind of Messiah pre-conversion Paul, the author of the letter to the Philippians, wanted either. The difference between Paul and most other Jews was that Paul had to have his understanding of godliness changed, and changed radically. Pre-conversion Paul was a Pharisee, one who studied, and trusted, and put his faith in the Law of Moses. Jesus' message was that the Jews had misunderstood the purpose of the Law of Moses. The Law was good in that it pointed to godliness, which is pleasing to God. But when the Jews made complying with the Law their god, instead of trying to please the giver of the Law, well then, they had lost their way. Jesus came to correct their path by revealing the true nature of God. Once Paul got the message he became the tireless evangelist for God revealed in Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned last week, Paul wrote this letter while he was in jail, yet we can't tell that. He wasn't bitter or angry. On the contrary, he wrote,

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

The former persecutor of Christians and overseer of the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian era, post-conversion Paul advocated

- gentleness,
- living in the moment, and
- not worrying, but *watching*,
- seeking the LORD in prayer,
- asking and then trusting God for what is needed, and
- then giving thanks.

And more than simply advocating for those behaviors, Paul taught them by his own life's example. How else could he be so at ease with his current plight?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Today I have taken you on a brief historical trip through time. The times I spoke of are vastly different from each other and from our own. However, even though the trip covered thousands of years, some things never change.

God has never changed. Human understanding of God has changed, but God has never changed.

And what God wants from God's creation has never changed. God wants faithfulness and godliness.

Human beings often chose a different path, one that ignores what God wants – that seems to never change.

As I said in the beginning, *watching* is the word of the day. Zephaniah foretold it. If God's people would have just repented and corrected their godless and faithless behavior and then kept watching they could have observed God at work in their midst.

The long watched-for forerunner to God's Messiah, John the Baptist, came onto the scene with his extraordinary proclamation of warnings and exhortations and filled

God's people with expectation. But what they *watched* for and got in Jesus Christ was not what they wanted.

Finally, the apostle Paul came onto the scene in that *in-between time* – the time between Jesus Christ's time on earth, and the time when he makes his promised return. Paul told his followers how they should live out their lives of discipleship in this *in-between time*. He said they should

- rejoice,
- be gentle,
- be at peace,
- continue to seek the LORD in prayer and supplication,
- never failing to give thanks.

Paul thought the LORD's return was imminent and clearly, he was wrong. The LORD has not returned yet, some 2000 years later. That means that we live in that same *in-between time*. That means that Paul's warnings and exhortations to his followers apply to us too.

Advent is a time when we are intentionally reminded, and reminded is not strong enough - maybe shaken out of our present condition, that of not anticipating anything to change; this Advent and Christmas will be like all the rest, more or less. So why should we change our behavior? I'm so glad you asked.

I see these readings addressing that complacent attitude. And our theme of the day, *watching*, informing what we should do, once we are shaken from our complacency.

God's final solution to our broken relationship with God, has come to us in Jesus Christ. He paid the price of our justification with God – he died in our place, and rose again, and before he returned to heaven, his rightful home, he told his followers that he will return. He's coming back. I don't know when, but we need to be ready and keep watching. You see, we too live in the in-between time.

I hope in your minds you are asking, as John's listeners did, “What then should we do?” I'm so glad you asked. Let us live out our lives of discipleship in this in-between time by:

- rejoicing in all situations,
- being gentle,
- being at peace,
- continuing to seek the LORD in prayer and supplication, and
- never failing to give thanks.

And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Prayer

Lord God and Father of our Savior Jesus Christ, shake us out of our complacency so that we will be found ready. In our readiness, inspire us to be watching for his promised return. It is in his name we pray. Amen