

The Lord in Our Midst

Zephaniah 3:14-20

As we travel ever further in the journey of anticipation that is Advent, the prophets yield important insights into the meaning of the season, and the character and fulfillment of God's promises. This week's scripture from the prophet Zephaniah carries within it the communal memory of suffering and divine judgment, but also anticipates fulfillment of God's promises.

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. They feel God. 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.

The short biblical book of Zephaniah was written in the seventh century BCE during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 BCE), who in the books of Kings and Chronicles, is characterized as the last great king. Zephaniah, however, witnesses another reality in the streets of Jerusalem. Lamenting idolatry, corruption, and injustice, the prophetic message found in the book sets the stage for the Josianic reform of 621 BCE, a major movement to reintroduce the statutes and ordinances of the Sinai covenant (see the Deuteronomic Code in Deut. 12-26). The book of Zephaniah consists of judgments oracles and the day of the Lord (Zeph. 1:2-3:8), a special day when all will be judged and found in breach of the covenant.

Zephaniah is acutely aware of the corruption and injustice perpetrated by Judah's leaders. Zephaniah details the spiritual and political oppression perpetrated by the leaders in Judah, and God's impending punishment: destruction. As a result of the social injustice, the oppressed are fearful and ashamed, while the powerful are haughty and corrupt and reject divine correction.

Zephaniah's song calls people to lament and repent. Jerusalem is idolatrous and complacent; the nations are corrupt. God is indignant. Then there is an abrupt and joyful shift, "Sing aloud...Rejoice and exult!" 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 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. There will be no disaster, no reproach, no shame, no fear. We listen to the prophets 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 prophetic word affirms that God's purposes are to make systems of injustice right, to heal the shame that results from oppression. In the exaltation of the humble and lowly, Zephaniah finds both a divine rejection of the abuses of power and a divine promise to protect the weak and the outcast. Compared to the unfaithful and corrupt Jerusalem there will be Jerusalem the city of universal rejoicing and justice; there is the contrast between idolatrous and purified—a city of violence versus a dove or city of peace. Death, destruction, despair and oppression will be replaced by God justice, peace and rejoicing. As in the time before the institution of the monarchy, in the times to come would be no need for a human king. As a

consequence, Jerusalem is admonished to fear no longer, because God will not only bring victory over the enemy but also join in rejoicing and song (vv. 16-17). Indeed, God will join together with the people in singing this hymn of praise.

While the prophet recounts all the ways in which God will deal with the oppressors, he reserves a special word for those who have suffered at their unjust hands: "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" (3:19). God promises to protect and lift up the lowly, the suffering, and the oppressed. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus nears, we are to remember the character of God's continuing and living promise to protect and exalt the lowly. This is the context in which the prophetic word, the coming of the Messiah, and the shape of the kingdom of God derive their meaning. It also is the context in which the character of God is revealed.

Such divine presence will bring universal liberation from oppression, illness, and social ostracism, Zephaniah proclaims (vv. 18-19). Indeed, the vision of a utopian society is invoked to motivate the audience to change the status quo. And as if such a vision was not enough, a homecoming with fame and fortune awaits at the finale (v. 20). (**Angela Bauer-Levesque**)

God comes to humanity in flesh. The Advent season walks us forward toward that birth the angels sang. But Zephaniah assures us that God also comes to humanity in the community of faith. God's presence heals, enlivens, and challenges humanity to lean into God's promises for an alternative future. (**Jennifer Ryan Ayres**)

We are not a people who welcome interruptions. Zephaniah reminds us that through prophetic interruptions God offers us glimpses of a hopeful

future that goes beyond getting us up in the morning. It frees us from fear and moves us to rejoice. (**Deborah A. Block**)

Words of promise and restoration were spoken through Zephaniah to people who knew national devastation, who knew isolation from community and home. As privileged people in twenty-first-century North America we hear these same words from a perspective of ease and comfort. We do experience the fears that war arouses, personal fears and anxieties, but it cannot be denied that our own experience is very different from that of Zephaniah's original hearers.

The people to whom Zephaniah spoke this word were experiencing profound challenges. Their nation was embarrassed on the international scene: they were a pawn in the movements of the great world powers Babylon, Assyria, and others. Foreign armies were a constant threat and sometime reality. Lack of food and water, the basic necessities of life, accompanied this instability. It is into this reality that Zephaniah speaks of restoration and an end to shame. Zephaniah promises not only an end to shame: Zephaniah promises that Israel will be praised throughout all the earth.

We also experience our own challenges and fears and shames. If God can restore the fortunes to a nation bowed down before the powers of the world and dragged away into slavery, then God can also banish our fears and our challenges.

As we read between the lines and we read our own souls we must face our own fears: we fear that God is not in our midst and that the enemies of good and God are winning. We fear that our hands are weak and powerless, atrophied by lack of useful work and helpful use, exercised in holding on but needing both physical and spiritual therapy to reach out. 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. Zephaniah's pastoral word to the people of God acknowledges our fear and dispels it with a promise of a transforming joy and not a threat of judgment.

But in a real sense, God's promised messianic kingdom and restoration of fortunes are not just for us and for our challenges. They are for the whole world. In God's messianic kingdom, oppressors will be dealt with (v. 19), because there will be no oppressed and no oppressors. In God's messianic kingdom, all the lame and the outcast will be restored. There will no "in groups" and "out groups," there will be no favored nations and unfavored nations. There will be no scattered nations and refugees, for all of God's people will be brought home and gathered (v. 20).

This year has been especially difficult for us: wars, political fights, forest fires, shootings of innocent people and children at theatres, shopping malls and schools; the latest just on Friday with the gunman killing innocent children and teachers. We largely do not experience extreme deprivation or shame, but these experiences have the world wondering what kind of people are these rich Americans. We must pray in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world who experience the world in ways much more like the experience of Zephaniah's hearers. We pray for an end to all disasters and conflicts, and we trust in God's promise for restoration.

As we pray in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world, we recognize that God's promise is also for us. At the end of the day, once we have recognized the differences between our own fears and the fears originally addressed by Zephaniah, we can say that God will banish our fears as well. God will ultimately bring an end to our pain and our suffering, whatever nature that pain and suffering take.

God brings good news to all people through the promise of Messiah and the final kingship of the Lord (v. 15). The good news is for the privileged of this world, as well as for those bowed down in this world. The good news is a promise of restoration to right relationships. When God promises that we will be praised throughout the world, the promise is based on who we are as God's children, and not on our own might or strength. When we are in right relationship with one another and with God, then we will be renowned and praised in all the earth (v. 20). **(Seth Moland-Kovash)**

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