

The Source of Joy
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18
December 13, 2009
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I. Introduction

Among my many unattractive character traits is a certain militancy regarding our parking lot, particularly around our spots reserved for people with a disability. So one morning, as I got out of my car, I watched a man pull into one of these spots, get out, and begin to walk down towards Starbucks. Well, I stopped him and said (very nicely), “Excuse me, but you’re in a parking spot reserved for someone with a disability, and this is not public parking.” He responded (very aggressively), “I’m only going to be a few minutes, and I’m a member here!” I said, “That’s good to know, because I’m the pastor here, and I don’t think that we’ve had the chance to meet.” He moved his car.

Now, obviously, I don’t think that this man was really a church member, but it does strike me that it’s an attitude that we see with some regularity. Christmas is one of the two times of year when “members” seem to come out of the woodwork. Many of them *really see* themselves as members of the church. John Wesley, commenting on this morning’s lectionary text on John the Baptist, worried that many Christians may gain a false confidence from their participation in the “visible church,” just as the ancient Jews gained false confidence from being children of Abraham.

Being a child of Abraham – or being part of the Christian community of faith – is more than membership. It’s even more than baptism. A surprising number of folks carry around the sense that if their children are baptized, they’ll get into heaven. John the Baptist is very clear that baptism is not going to save those coming to him; what was needed was a living out of the reality of that baptism. Advent, as we discussed last week, is the season of preparation; not just preparing for Christmas as we decorate our houses and buy presents for our loved ones, but preparation welcoming the Christ into our lives every day – a presence that transforms and heals and is the only real source of joy (as we affirmed in the lighting of the candle this morning).

II. The Great Reversal

“Joy” is not the word that comes to mind when we hear these words from John the Baptist. John’s words to his hearers are incredibly harsh: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (John clearly did not have a Staff-Parish

Relations Committee to report to!). But interestingly, the people don't push back at all: they simply say, "What then should we do?" (I never really hear that from you all! Maybe there's another sermon there).

And John responds with some fairly simple instructions, but instructions worth looking at. While on some level, these instructions are obvious, they were probably a little unexpected to John's listeners. John starts off with words that we all still need to hear: that those who have more than enough, have a sacred obligation to share what they have with those who don't have enough. But then, when the tax collectors and soldiers address him, the conversation takes an unexpected turn. Tax collectors in Roman Palestine submitted bids to the government to be able to collect tolls. They made their money by charging more in taxes than they submitted for the bid. The soldiers that John was preaching to were probably not Roman soldiers, but the private soldiers that local government or wealthy people hired. They were essentially mercenaries and were not paid very much. They made their money through a variety of extortions that were despised by the local population, but *largely expected*. It was just the way business was done then.

Now, it's easy for us to distance ourselves from these characters, observing that we don't engage in that kind of exploitation. But John's point is that the systems that we participate in – and that are accepted without significant thought -- are still issues that we need to address as children of *God's kingdom*. John's challenge to us is to look at the myriad of ways in which the systems of our society work to benefit us that are so pervasive that we've stopped noticing. Preparing the "way of the Lord" is about addressing the injustice of the systems in which we participate, *even if we are not responsible for creating the systems*.

This is a prominent theme throughout the writings of the prophet Zephaniah who we just heard from. Zephaniah was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, prophesying in the early seventh century B.C.E., just a little before Babylon conquered Judah. His background is interesting, in that he is both a descendent of King Hezekiah and of African heritage. His short book is made up of nine oracles, filled with images of doom and condemnation, aimed both at Judah and her surrounding neighbors.

Zephaniah's criticism of Judah and Jerusalem very much echo the words of John the Baptist: he warns the people against the complacency of trusting that their status as the chosen people will save them. Zephaniah was frustrated at an attitude that was akin to that old American Express commercial: "Membership has its privileges." Zephaniah wanted the people to understand that being God's people was an incredible blessing, but an equivalent responsibility; and you couldn't get the former if you didn't embrace the latter. So his book is filled with the dire consequences of not embracing the responsibilities of being God's people. But then, at the very end, in our passage for today, the tone completely changes, and we have this beautiful hymn of joyful praise (words, again, that we heard last week in Handel's *Messiah*):

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

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

What Zephaniah seems to be indicating is that though destruction will fall upon Judah from the Babylonians as a result of their sinfulness, that punishment is also a tool through which they will be cleansed and prepared to receive the presence of God, their King and Savior, into their midst. That while their short term prospects are pretty grim, God will ultimately redeem them and be present with them, and they will live the rich and joyous life that God has intended.

III. What Then Shall We Do?

For example, those of us in more affluent communities also have the benefit of being able to buy our groceries cheaper, because this is where large supermarkets locate themselves. In lower-income communities, people have less access to large supermarkets and are therefore more likely to purchase their groceries from a smaller market with less economies of scale, and therefore charging higher prices. Do you know that if you get a disability check in DC, it is drawn on a D.C. bank account; but that bank won't let you cash it there? So if you don't have an account at another bank, you have to go to a local check cashing store and get charged an exorbitant fee.

For example, what's the biggest tax benefit that most of us take in a year? The deduction on our mortgage, right? If two people have the same income, and one owns and one rents, then the one who owns is going to pay less tax (all other things being equal). Now on some level, you can argue that our tax structure is set up to encourage home ownership, which is great. What it does also, however, is support those of us with enough capital to invest in property.

If someone has no health insurance, they are probably not going to go to a doctor until they are in a health crisis, when care is the most expensive and is most likely to turn their medical crisis into a financial crisis. And, of course, at this time of year, low-income people are more likely to pay more for their gifts, because they're more likely to be purchasing them on credit, and they're more likely to have credit cards with higher interest rates.

Now it's easy to say, "Well, if they are making purchases on credit cards, they shouldn't really be purchasing those things at all." And on some level, you'd be right. But when it's Christmas, and your family has had a rough year, and your children are surrounded by values of consumption, it is an easy trap to fall into.

John and Zephaniah's challenge is that our preparations for welcoming the great king aren't simply about my internal preparation. Note that when the people ask John what they should do, he doesn't say, "Pray, fast, study Scripture" (as important as those things are). He says, "Act with justice." Instead of blithely going by unaware of the ways in which people are exploited, do something about it.

One thing that we can do right now, through our work with the Washington Interfaith Network – and the national efforts of WIN's parent organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation – is to join our voices with the voices of faith communities around our country to urge Congress to establish caps on credit card interest rates. We used to have usury laws in our country, that were repealed twenty-five years ago or so on the theory that the market would regulate interest better than the government, and interest rates have spiraled out of control in the decades since then. It's time to re-examine this issue and we'll have the chance to speak out on this as we enter the new year.

IV. Conclusion

John the Baptist and the prophet Zephaniah want us to understand that our salvation as individuals and as a community does not flow from our membership in a church or our status as God's people. But rather, our status as God's people is about creating the community in which God will rejoice. Challenging as their words are, Luke tells us that "the people were filled with expectation" as they awaited the coming of the great King.

Amen.