

## ***How Near the Good News!***

Third Sunday of Advent  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, December 13, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's rather remarkable, I suppose, that Kate Braestrup remembers what happened in the first hour after learning that her husband Drew had been killed in a car accident. Most people speak instead of the blur and haze surrounding them in those early moments as they attempt to come to grips with the most devastating news they have ever received. But Kate remembers what happened in that first hour, and writes about it in her memoir, *Here If You Need Me*. In this book she describes her journey through grief and her eventual call to ministry as chaplain of the Warden Service in the state of Maine.

In that first hour after her husband died, Kate sat in her living room with her dear friend Monica, talking on the telephone with a police sergeant about the accident. The doorbell rang, so Monica answered it. A clean-cut young man with unflagging enthusiasm, smiled vigorously, held out a pamphlet to Monica, and said in his best preachy voice, "Have you heard the Good News?"

Monica later told Kate she didn't know what to do, whether to punch him in the face or laugh hysterically, so she did the next best thing and slammed the door.

Honestly, where was the good news? Where could it be found in that moment of raw grief? There's Kate—instantaneously propelled into young widowhood, four young children to raise, no career aspirations or real education to bring home the bacon, and her helpmate, the love of her life, gone from this earthly life.

Good news? The young man, full of faith and fervor, would have spoken of God and his salvation, how God's power and mercy and forgiveness have been made known. And all that would be true—it **is** true. You can't fault the guy for trying to share his faith in God. But in that moment, it would not have been heard as good news...not exactly. It would, perhaps, have been cold comfort, not warm assurance.

I thought about that story as I read our lessons for today. You know, the prophets of old, such as Zephaniah, whose book we read from in our 1<sup>st</sup> lesson, were caught in a quandary as they brought the word of the Lord to the people Israel. They had to announce **both** God's judgment against sin **and** God's promise to save and restore. Often at the same time! And while some of their words dealt with the current time frame, other words looked far, far into the future. So it was an odd mixture of prophecy to which they gave voice: Disobedience and punishment and human brokenness stood right alongside redemption and restoration and the hope of a future with God. Sometimes it didn't sound much like good news—not exactly. Sometimes the good news only offered cold comfort for those hard-pressed and sorely chastened.

Sometimes the good news seemed too far away, too far removed from present pain to heal that pain.

For 3½ chapters, Zephaniah has pronounced doom and gloom and God's destruction of both Israel and the nations. And then—there is this abrupt shift at vs. 14, where you and I start today. Beginning at vs. 14, there is this sudden call from God for Israel to sing for joy because there is good news: **God is in her midst**. We don't notice this abrupt shift, because today we only begin at vs. 14, but I wanted to set it in its proper context. For 3½ chapters, Zephaniah has described a world that is broken, full of death and sorrow, and sin and wickedness and injustice. For 3½ chapters, he describes God's righteous anger and over all that. But here he writes that God comes near. God comes to dwell with his people. God comes as good news, not just divine retribution.

And it's fascinating to see how Zephaniah shows in his words this movement of God coming near. First, at vs. 15, God is Pardoning Judge. You can almost envision him sitting high on the judge's bench: God takes away judgments and punishments. God forgives. The trial is over. Then God moves closer: In vs. 17, Zephaniah describes God as Mighty Warrior. He fights for his people, enters into battle for them, brings victory, and rejoices over them. And then in vs. 19, God moves closer still. In fact, Zephaniah no longer speaks in 3<sup>rd</sup> person here, telling the people that the Lord does this and the Lord does that. Now Zephaniah speaks in 1<sup>st</sup> person---God himself is speaking—**that's** how near he is: *I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise...At that time I will bring you home...*

Zephaniah shows God coming closer and closer to his people. God does not intend to be either oddly detached or far removed from the realities of their lives. God envelops and embraces his people, especially the most broken and needy, like a shepherd gathering vulnerable lambs in his arms. This is good news. And God does not intend it to be simply cold comfort.

But, you know even John the Baptist seems caught in a similar quandary as Zephaniah. John, the last great prophet before Jesus' arrival, preaches to the people in the wilderness. There he announces **both** the deep necessity for God's people to change their ways and begin to act justly and mercifully **and** the promise that the Lord will come sometime in the future. Once again, like the prophets of old, John the Baptist has to give this odd mixture of prophecy where judgment and punishment and winnowing out the chaff to be burned stand right alongside hope and expectation and assurance that God will save. Then Luke writes: *So, with many other exhortations, (John) proclaimed the good news to the people.*

Well, you almost have to laugh—it doesn't sound much like good news...not exactly. The good news still seems too far away, too detached and removed from the present reality of those listening to John who are hard-pressed and sorely chastened. But you can't fault John the Baptist for trying. After all, what John said was true—**is** true, but even he himself could not know or understand just how much more powerful Jesus would be than he, and **what** that power could do. John the Baptist and the people in the wilderness simply had to wait for the Lord to arrive—to come close—to learn what the good news was all about.

You and I wait, Advent days dwindling down till we can at last know and celebrate what truly is good news at Christmas: God come near, God moving into the midst of his people, God not detached or far removed from the realities of our lives. If a far-away God were the God we worshiped, one would wonder whether that far-away God could ever touch the brokenness within us and around us. And that, my friends, is what **makes** Jesus more powerful than prophet or far-away deity: For Jesus **is** God, and Jesus comes to us, is **present with** us, from that moment of his birth in Bethlehem...to his walking among sinners and outcasts...to his own experience of our human suffering on the cross...to his gift of himself in nourishing meal before us. He has chosen to move closer and closer to us, as close as he can possibly get, so like a shepherd he can gather us up, all of us vulnerable, broken people, and make a home with us in order that healing and real life can begin. That's good news we can proclaim.

**But maybe our "proclaiming" is to be more of a "doing."** Kate describes what happened in that hour after she learned her husband Drew was killed in a car accident. Only a few minutes after that door-to-door preacher left the scene with his pamphlet of good news, the doorbell rang again. Kate answered the door this time. It was her neighbor, an elderly woman she barely knew, having had few conversations with her over the years. But now this woman came near. She came near carrying a pan of brownies still hot from the oven, and tears were rolling down her cheeks and she blurted out, "I just heard about your husband."

Here's how Kate describes that experience and the days that followed: *That pan of brownies was the leading edge of a tsunami of food that came to my children and me—a wave that did not recede for many months after Drew's death. I didn't know that my family and I would be fed three meals a day for weeks and weeks. I did not anticipate that neighborhood men would come to drywall the playroom, build bookshelves, mow the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, that I would have embraces and listening ears, that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew was that my neighbor was standing on the front stoop with her brownies and her tears: she **was** the Good News.*

Kate remembers her neighbor stood there and added plaintively, "I wish I could do more." Don't we all? Sometimes you and I, in our living out our faith, in our loving our neighbor, are certain it's not going to be enough. Too much pain to heal, too much brokenness to repair. In which case, we have simply forgotten what John said about Jesus—that he is more powerful, much more powerful than John or any of us can ever imagine. Can't we trust that power has come near to work through us?

Well, maybe Kate understood that, for after her neighbor with the brownies said "I wish I could do **more**," this is what Kate remembers thinking: *...all I could think as I gazed at her, shining before me in the electric air, was "What more need there be on earth than this? Than you?"*

The Good News is not some dispassionate, antiseptic wording in a religious tract. No, the Good News is teeming with life and love and courage to reach down into the

world's depths and produce hope once more. The Good News is that our Lord Jesus who came, and who comes, and who is still to come again, works his way ever closer into our hearts and lives with power more than enough for every need.

**AMEN.**