

Convicted, Punished, Redeemed

Third Sunday of Advent
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, PhD

Saturday, December 12, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

The story is everywhere, on TV, on the radio, and in the magazines and newspapers. The great golfer, Tiger Woods, has been exposed. The very media that built him up as the flawless, family oriented, extraordinary athlete is now engaged in a frenzy to expose him as a moral reprobate. The court of public opinion has been summoned and he is publicly proclaimed guilty.

Lo, we say, how the mighty are fallen. But no more fallen than we ourselves. Tiger Woods' unfaithfulness, his sinfulness, is, however, no different than ours. And, in the human view of things that is an inescapable conclusion. But in the eyes of God, all sins are of equal effect, there is no quantitative difference. Sin is sin, it is in all its forms, minor and major, deadly, and that speaks to the profound nature of our sinfulness.

Do you remember the quote from first John which was part of the liturgy of forgiveness in the green book? "We are in bondage to sin, and cannot free ourselves." Or, as Martin Luther put it, we are at one and the same time saints and sinners. The problems begin when we forget that simple fact of human brokenness. That is the troubling truth for the people of God down through the ages. In both the scriptural readings before us this evening the faithful people of God frequently fall into disobedience but fail to see it. The hard and horrible truth is, that left unchanged, such conduct earns the wrath of God. Which is as true for us as it is for Tiger Woods and the "self-righteous" media that exploits him. You see the tendency to deny disobedience and sinfulness and think that one is home free is a common trap for the faithful.

Just so, in the gospel, John the Baptist denies that Israel's chosen status, that esteemed, long-standing, ethnic perk of being "children of Abraham," retains any significant merit. No matter what one's pedigree, or how conscientious, "by-the-book," one's behavior, without "fruits," God's wrath is sure and God's judgment is imminent. Even now John claims the "ax is lying at the root of the tree." The judgment process has already actually begun. John indicts two particular groups, tax collectors and soldiers, whose behavior marks them as "vipers." There is no safe haven from the wrath of God and the people cry out, "what then should we do?"

Such a question has enveloped Tiger Woods in the last few days. Having been exposed, how should he react? One can only guess at the windfall gain being made by the advisors, lawyers, and media consults he has employed to try and deal with the character destroying publicity that currently engulfs him. Thank the dear Lord that we are not celebrities. Every one of us here present has something in our past or present that would mortify us if it were to become public knowledge. We all

have something hidden away of which we are guilty and ashamed. And so, when we recall those vents and behaviors we find ourselves like the people listening to John.

We are gathered, if you will, in a wilderness of our own making. We are in the wilderness when we admit we do not have total authority over our own fate; that we sin and suffer despite our efforts to be in control. We dwell in the wilderness when all our worldly power seems to amount to a hill of beans. Yet the pain does not cause our demise or despair but acts as a siren, alerting us to the power of God's grace, a healing balm to our wounds, which empowers us to repent of our sinful ways. Once we open ourselves to God's forgiving love, we move from anxiety to freedom. We ask for and seek forgiveness just as Tiger Woods has done publicly. And there we find revealed one aspect of the commercial pre-Christmas season that corresponds to the intended religious mood of Advent: the excited expectation of children, the longing for the anticipated gift.

In both of our Old Testament passages for this week, we hear further testimony about this new thing God is about to do and has done for all of humanity. Zephaniah declares, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst... He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will renew you in his love." Loud praises and singing for this unforgettable and transformational event about to take place and that has taken place. Truly, in Jesus Christ, we are renewed and refreshed. And when we fast-forward to Luke, we find John exactly where we left him last week: talking to the crowds about the coming of the Messiah.

He first confronts them about their pasts. He exhorts them not to think that their ancestry will give them special privileges. No, this Messiah is here for all of humanity, including Tiger Woods, and yes, the media! We all are on equal ground here. What an exciting message for most! We will not be judged by our earthly status, but we are instead called to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." John doesn't give one prescription to everyone about the fruit they are to bear. Tax collectors must learn to be fair and not extract more than the appointed rate. Soldiers are to stop intimidating people. People are called to do what they can in their lives to live as Christ would have them live. In other words, ethical responses are the first line of response to salvation. Note here that it is in response to salvation. Salvation comes freely to us through Christ. We must be careful not to think that it is because some great thing we personally have done that we have been saved. It is through Christ, not because of our great deeds, that we are saved.

As Christians, however, we respond to this gift through our deeds. We respond to God's grace by continually growing more and more into the footsteps of Christ. And then John speaks of baptism. He speaks of the baptism he is giving as inferior to that which is coming. He only uses water. The Messiah is coming, the one "mightier" than I, and He will have the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This baptism will carry fire and passion. How sad it is that often people stop with the "baptism of water." We need to understand that baptism is not simply a rite of passage. How many times do Christians see baptism as the "test to pass" or the "thing to do"

versus the beginning of an extraordinary journey? We need to understand that baptism is a mark of God's permanent ownership and the beginning of an extraordinary journey. For this baptism of water that we bestow on infants, children, youth, and adults is the visible sign of invisible grace, and only the very start of a part of faith, life, and growth. Christ offers us a baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit. It is a promise of transformation and renewal. The crowd is filled with great expectations about what is about to happen.

Are we really ready to bear fruits worthy of repentance, to allow our lives to be changed? That is the promise of having Christ in our midst. Our lives are about to be completely transformed. It is this transformation that is ours and is also available to Tiger Woods and the media. And the transformation is sealed for us in the simple meal that awaits us. The bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins and the reassurance that we are God's beloved children no matter what.

Such a remarkable judgment and transformation, I like to think, goes something like this. On a British Airways flight from Johannesburg a middle-aged, well-off white South African lady found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the cabin crew attendant to complain about her seating. "What seems to be the problem, Madam?" asked the attendant. "Can't you see?" she said. "You've sat me next to a kaffir, a colored person, an African... I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat!" "Please calm down, Madam," the stewardess replied. "The flight is very full today, but I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class." The woman glared at the outraged black man beside her, not to mention many of the surrounding passengers. A few minutes later the stewardess returned with the good news, which she delivered to the lady, who could not help herself looking at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin: "Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I've spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class." Before the lady had a chance to answer, the stewardess continued, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade. However, I have special permission from the captain. Given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With that, she turned to the black man sitting next to the woman, and said: "So if you'd like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you ...". At which point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation while the black man walked up to the front of the plane.

Amen.

Copyright © 2009, J. Stewart Hardy. All rights reserved.