

Hope from Despair

Third Sunday of Advent
The Reverend John H. Brock

Sunday, December 13, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Psalm 12:2-6;
Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Hope out of despair. That's what Zephaniah is talking about in the words we heard this morning – hope coming out of a near desperate situation. Zephaniah is writing at a time when young Josiah took the throne. Josiah came to the throne there in Judah at eight years of age. His “handlers,” those to whom he turned for guidance, are for the most part, in this for themselves – but isn't that the way things work? Isn't it right, “looking out for number one”? Josiah will, though, grow up to be the last righteous king of Judah, as he rules in Jerusalem. But during Zephaniah's time, Josiah is still a young boy, and corruption reigns supreme.

Josiah is one of the good kings. He will bring about reform. He will bring the focus of the people back to the Lord God Almighty. But until that comes about, there is a moral darkness, a turning away from the Lord God Almighty, an air of despair that permeates all of Judah and Jerusalem.

The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians about a hundred years prior to Josiah ascending the throne, and at that time, King Hezekiah was able to buy off the Assyrians, get them to leave Jerusalem alone. But the Assyrians went the way of the dodo, they're no longer around, and it's the Babylonians who are the new up and coming power. And they don't take “no” for an answer. In the first two and a half chapters of this three chapter book, through threats and condemnations, while pointing out where people had gone wrong, how they had turned their backs on the Lord God Almighty and how they are facing destruction because of their actions against God, Zephaniah strives to get the people to return to God. But when your back is firmly toward God, and when your ears hear only what you want to hear, it's rather difficult to see in which direction God is pointing you. And yet Zephaniah ends his message with the words we heard this morning, these words of hope in the midst of despair.

John, baptizing by the Jordan River, gave people plenty of reasons to despair, plenty of reasons to repent, plenty of reasons to turn away from the wrongs they were doing and continued to do. Their country was occupied by a foreign power. They were being taxed not only by that foreign power, but by their own government. There was plenty of reason for despair. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Don't rest on being descendants of Abraham, John says, because the Lord God Almighty can make descendants of Abraham out of these stones that are all around us. Do something! Help those in need. Don't keep it all for yourself. John saw the despair around him, the despair caused by the corrupt military, the despair caused by cheating tax collectors, and even the despair of the proverbial everyman, the ones who were not well-off enough to own two coats. What do we do? How do we act, they asked him? You know what to do, he said, you know how to act. Yet one who is more powerful than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie his sandals. Out of despair, John brings them hope.

A woman came into the office this week. She told me how she had been laid off after thirteen years with the same company. She has three children, but isn't receiving any help from their father. She has an appointment with New Hope Ministries to see if they can help her get a place to live and possibly even help her find new, meaningful employment. "I'm not asking for money" she said, "I just need help with food."

I explained our policy to her: we can help a person or family once every twelve months; we need to make a copy of her photo ID which we will keep on file; we don't help with money, but we do give gift cards. And that's what I did. I gave her a gift card to the local grocery store, as well as a list of local food banks and shelters and places where they could go for a free meal. And because of the season, and because I believed her (and I do not believe everyone who comes in asking for help), I gave her gift cards to a local department store so she might be able to get some presents for her children. And that's when she began to cry. And I realized that, very accidentally, I had given her hope in the midst of her despair.

The Advent season is a time of waiting, Advent is a time of preparation, Advent is a time of expectation – it's what this season is all about. We're looking for something; we're looking forward to something. Hopefully something we want, hopefully something good (at least in our own eyes), something that we anticipate, desire, long for. Maybe what we desire involves another person. Maybe it's simply a thing – a toy or a tool or an electronic gadget. But maybe what we desire this Advent season is a longed-for relationship. Maybe what we're hoping for is a mending of a broken friendship, or perhaps the strengthening of an acquaintance looking to become something more. But whatever it is, we're all looking for hope, looking for guidance, to be led in the right direction. We're hoping for some sign to come, but not just any kind of a sign, because we want to know that we're going to get the good stuff – after all we deserve the good stuff! We've been good kids this year and we deserve the goodies, not coal this season. I deserve the good things because I've earned them – I've gone to church, I've given money to the poor, I pay my taxes, I give away clothes I no longer want – I'm a good person, I deserve to be treated well. At least that's what this season, and the commercials I've seen, tend to remind me. But it's not what I have done that decides if I'm good enough, and so I await the advent of my own rewards.

Now I don't know what the despair is in your life. Maybe your mortgage is really iffy. Perhaps your means of employment is looking less and less stable, or maybe it's already gone. Maybe there's a rift in your family that you just don't know how to repair. Possibly this is the time of year that brings back far too many memories of days past, of the good times that will happen no more, or of the bad times that continue to play inside your head.

Zephaniah gave the people of his day a reason to hope. Twenty-six hundred years later, he continues to give us reason to hope. "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" I'll tell you what to look for: The Lord God Almighty has taken away the judgments against you. The Lord has removed disasters from you. The Lord will deal with your oppressors. The Lord will exalt over you, and bring you home. The Lord will make you whole. Zephaniah told it to the people of his day, and Zephaniah tells it to us today. Prepare. Get ready, for the Lord God Almighty is coming. And God will make a home of hope in our hearts again.

Amen.

Copyright © 2009, John H. Brock. All rights reserved.