

Zephaniah 3:14-20
December 13, 2009

South Plains

God On Our Side

When Mike London was introduced as the football coach at the University of Virginia, one of the images on TV repeatedly was that of London on the sidelines, arms raised over his head with a huge smile wrapped around his face, leaping into the air with joy. That's the picture of prophetic joy in our Old Testament readings today. Zephaniah says, "Rejoice and exult with all your heart." 'Exult' literally means to leap or dance: a whole-bodied joy that words alone cannot contain.

It's the skipping, bouncy joy we feel as children, the release of finishing school and throwing your mortarboard into the air, the reunion of lovers long separated, the springy step of a grandmother getting off the plane to meet her grandchildren.

Sometimes that joy is quieter and even more profound. I spoke on the telephone with an old friend who lost her mother to pneumonia on November 13. She talked about the contented happiness of knowing the long siege of nursing homes was finally over and her assurance of her mother's place in God's care. That is also the joy of this Advent season.

Zephaniah is one of the more minor prophets, at least in the sense that we know little about him personally

and we seldom read his prophecy. Most of what he has to say is a warning to Israel, to Judea, and to the nations surrounding them. The Day of the Lord will be a day of terrible judgment. No one is spared God's anger over their sins. That's the message until the very end of the book. I suspect that when the Holy Spirit inspired some unknown Hebrew to collect the words of Zephaniah for Holy Scripture, God decided to balance these warnings with a word of hope. So, in the concluding verses, the prophet rings the changes on how God works to save his people, to show them that God is on their side.

That's the message of Advent, a message that is too easily hidden under the straw in the manger, or drowned out by the magnificence of those angel choirs. The truth is that the child of Bethlehem is a divine guarantee that God is on the side of humanity. God becomes human. God has been on our side all along. We simply don't recognize grace because we're too busy grabbing at brief pleasures. We think we can guarantee our own security, our own future. Sometimes our national pride leads us to believe we can fix the world. In the final analysis, the one thing we can do is to rest in God's care, to believe that God's way in Jesus Christ is the best way despite the hardships we endure and the sacrifices imposed on us. We can trust the God on our side.

Zephaniah reminds us why we can rest and rejoice in God with a series of images: God is on our side as judge, warrior and healer.

like ministers of the gospel, others disagree vehemently with my politics, some fiercely resent the comforts of my middle class life, and from time to time, my fellow Presbyterians think I'm a real and present danger to Christianity. I cannot take much comfort in the illusion that I'm right and my enemies are wrong. I am comforted by the promise that the divine warrior stands by me and protects me. Physical harm may come to me; and my self-esteem may be hurt by their scorn. But, in the words of Isaiah 12:2, "Surely God is my salvation," because God is fighting for me. The divine warrior is on my side.

In the last three verses of the book of Zephaniah, the voice of the prophet changes. Instead of speaking about God, the prophet speaks for God.

I will remove disaster from you....

I will deal with your oppressors...

I will save the lame and gather the outcast....

I will bring you home.

This is the voice of the Good Shepherd who rescues and heals and comforts. When the judge has sent away our accusers and pronounced us "not guilty," and when the warrior can hang up his weapons, the good shepherd gathers us into his arms.

Every Advent we celebrate the promised justice and restoration that we can see by faith beginning with the birth of Jesus and confirmed by his resurrection. We can have confidence in God's future, a future unshaken by terrorism because God will triumph. It's a future

This judge is a forgiving judge. "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you (3:15)." Before there was Judge Judy or Judge Joe on TV, people would go downtown to visit real courtrooms for entertainment. Most of the time, anyone can understand the real life tension of the courtroom. Although we don't like to picture God as a judge these days, in fact, the prophets use courtroom scenes frequently to describe our relationship to the Ruler of the Universe. God's people are on trial and God is the judge. The problem with this picture of our heavenly Father is not God's role as the one who sits in judgment. We are rightly accused and prosecuted for sinning against our Maker. What we forget is that the verdict is "Not guilty, in Christ." Not guilty because Jesus the Christ has taken our guilt and our punishment. All the judgments against us are taken away, expunged from the record, and we have a clean slate in God's eyes. Just as important, any accusations against us from our enemies are also wiped off the record. That's a verdict to rejoice over. The forgiving judge is on our side.

That's not the only role God plays for us. "The Lord your God, is in your midst," says the prophet, "a warrior who gives victory." There are times in this world when we need a champion, someone who will take up for us like a big brother. If you were to ask me on a bright, sunny day, "David, who are your enemies? Who wants to do you harm? I would laugh and reply that I have no enemies. But, the truth is that some people really don't

undiminished by corruption and greed because God will deal with oppressors. It's a future that is not overwhelmed by either natural disasters or human cruelties because God will heal. Our own cruelties and mistakes will be made right.

In the end, the Good Shepherd brings us home. There are many kinds of homecomings we will celebrate in the next few weeks. Children will come home from school. Travelers brave the winter roads to join family for the holidays. Hospitals will make a special effort to discharge their patients whenever possible. Some soldiers will finish a tour of duty. Working people look forward to signing out on Christmas Eve for at least one extra day of rest.

The first holiday that I spent away from home was a Thanksgiving when I was in seminary 2700 miles from my parents. The school anticipated that situation and offered to connect students with local families willing to host us for a Thanksgiving meal. Another student and I traveled to a part of town where the homes were smaller with unkempt yards. We were welcomed by four children between two and ten years old. The table was crowded; and I worried about the turkey as it came out of the oven. You see, both parents were blind. All the children could see, and they helped their mother determine that the meal was ready. They guided her mittened hands as she brought it out of the stove.

I cannot say it was the best Thanksgiving ever, because I was not at my home. But, I have looked at home a little differently since that holiday. Their family worked together well. Husband and wife had made the adjustments and learned the routines necessary to make a home, no small feat for two blind people. Their meal was more than adequate. And, the grace we said over the food meant more that day. The Lord had gathered these unlikely folks and made us a home; and they had opened their doors to two strangers who needed a place to go.

Each of us has a mental picture, a dream of our ideal home. For many, that ideal cannot be realized. Not yet, anyway. Nevertheless, we can rejoice.

Whatever judgments God could bring against us, God has removed for Christ's sake. Our enemies and oppressors will be overcome. Our disabilities, diseases and wounds will be healed. And, if we still don't feel like rejoicing, the Lord will help us with that as well. Zephaniah pictures God rejoicing over us:

He will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival. (3:17)

Some of us know the hymn in our new Hymnal, "I Danced In The Morning." That's a song we need to sing for the Easter season. The dancer is none other than Jesus himself, dancing his way through the history of the

world, dancing through the cruelties of crucifixion and dancing out of the tomb. The chorus invites us,

Dance, then, wherever you may be,

I am the Lord of the dance said he,

And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,

And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

Sing!

Shout!

Rejoice!

Exult with all your heart!

For the Lord rejoices over you.