

Renewed in Love, Restored to Hope  
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 1:26-38  
December 16, 2018  
Advent III  
Leslie A. Klingensmith

“The shipwrecked do not seek peace because they aren’t disturbed by the lack of it. By that I mean the subjective feeling of peace. Circumstances can play havoc with our emotions, the day can be stormy or fair and our feelings will fluctuate accordingly; but if we are in Christ Jesus, we are in peace and there unflustered *even when we feel no peace*. Meister Eckhart’s equation ‘In Christ equals in peace,’ is always valid. When we accept the truth of ourselves-shipwrecked and saved-our lives are henceforth anchored in the Rock who is Christ, not in the shifting sands of our fickle feelings.

This is a point of capital importance for those who would fully experience the grace of Christmas. When we are in right relationship with Jesus, we are in the peace of Christ. Except for grave, conscious, deliberate infidelity, which must be recognized and repented of, the presence or absence of *feelings* of peace is the normal ebb and flow of the spiritual life. When things are plain and ordinary, when we live on the plateaus and in the valleys (which is where most of the Christian life takes place) and not on the mountaintops of peak religious experience, this is no reason to blame ourselves, to think that our relationship with God is collapsing, or to echo Magdalene’s cry in the garden ‘Where has my beloved gone?’ Frustration, irritation, fatigue, and so forth may temporarily unsettle us, but they cannot rob us of living in the peace of Jesus Christ. As the playwright Ionesco once declared in the middle of a depression ‘Nothing discourages me, not even discouragement.’”

This lengthy quote is one I return to from time to time, in Advent and also during difficult times throughout the year. It’s from Brennan Manning’s book *Shipwrecked at the Stable*. Manning uses the term “shipwrecked” as a metaphor for the lost, the broken, the lonely – all of

us, really, at least those of us who recognize our own brokenness and dependence on God.. I would love to use the book for our Advent study series sometime, but sadly it is out of print. What appeals to me about Manning's meditation is that he is so honest about the ups and downs of the spiritual life. There have been times when I'm super harsh with myself because I feel stressed out or sad or angry and I think that if my faith were only stronger I wouldn't have to deal with these normal human emotions.

Incidentally, seminary is a great place to have this bogus theology drummed into your head. Not so much the professors, but the students. I have vivid memories of feeling judged by my classmates if I admitted to anxiety. "Not me," one of the (usually) guys would say. "I'm too blessed to be stressed." Or something like "You should NOT be worried about that Old Testament exam. The Holy Spirit got you into this, the Holy Spirit is gonna get you out." Yes, well, the Holy Spirit isn't filling out the blue book. My point is that we all have times when we are upset by things happening either in our own lives or in the world around us – or both. If we didn't feel pain, or sorrow, or fear, we would just be a bunch of robots. Manning's words give us a pathway to acknowledge our less peaceful times as a normal part of who we are, while at the same time working toward a deeper peace that Christ is offering us – a peace that transcends the circumstances of any given moment.

Both of the readings today offer us some insight into this peace which feels so elusive but isn't as remote as we think, if we will just cut ourselves a break. This is one of the reasons why it is important to read the prophets during Advent, as well as the familiar passages from the New Testament that tell all the beloved stories of the season. We are mistaken if we separate the God of the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) from the God who became flesh in the New. What the prophets can do for us right now is remind us of the ebb and flow of life. There are good times, there are bad times – God is with us through them all. The God of the Israelites

is so often portrayed as vengeful, jealous, and punishing. It won't surprise you all to hear that I really don't think God is like that at all, although there must be times when God is angry and disappointed. I have to wonder if the harshest descriptions of God and God's judgements described by the prophets are more the musings of bewildered people, desperate to make sense out of the chaos in which they live. That's really a conversation for a different day, but what I'm getting at is that, whether or not you believe that the portrait of God painted by the prophets is factually true, there is a consistent theme that emerges that links us to the God we meet in the New Testament – yes, that same one who loves us enough to take on the frailties of being human and come to live among us. That theme is reconciliation, restoration of relationship. No matter how angry God gets with the Israelites, the prophets always come back around to God's love for God's people and how God wants to be part of our lives.

Zephaniah, for instance. I would call Zephaniah one of our more obscure prophets. There's not a whole lot of information about him, at least that can be verified with certainty. We do know that Zephaniah was a priest, probably of royal descent, whose ministry took place during the reign of King Josiah. We are most familiar with Israel's strife with Egypt and later the Babylonian exile. It's easy to forget that in the time between them finding the promised land and the exile, there were all kinds of wars with other nations in the area. Like the other preachers of his day, Zephaniah admonishes the people. He is particularly concerned about blending of religious traditions and the corruption of worship practices (in his mind) caused by such blending. There was not the separation between government and covenantal religious life that we have come to expect, so Zephaniah believed that the government of Israel was enabling these sinful practices taking place in the temple. Zephaniah makes dire predictions about the destruction this will cause, and he draws a direct line between these failures of the Israelites to be faithful and the military defeats that are to come.

And yet...Zephaniah does not end with destruction.. The place where I started reading this morning is the spot where the tone shifts. In spite of the ways that Israel has messed things up, God still loves them and intends to ultimately restore them to prosperity and power. I especially cherish the promises in verse 17 that God will “rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in his love.” The King James translation of the Bible is significantly different here. It reads that “God will rejoice over you and *will hold his peace in his love.*” We are freed from the burden of what we have done wrong and able to start a new life. The war cry has been stilled. Israel can make a new start. Not only do they have reason to celebrate, God is every bit as overjoyed as they are. That is what is so incredible about all this, that God is so happy to welcome us back into the fold. This is God behaving as the model for the father in the parable of the prodigal son. And God does not only forgive Israel, or forgive us. God participate in restoring our hope, making us better than we were before. “I will save the lame and gather the outcast,” says God through Zephaniah’s voice...”and I will bring you home.” In spite of the grim prognostications that the prophets make, this is where they lead us...to a place where we are renewed in love and restored in hope.

And what would this little known prophet have to do with Gabriel’s famous visit to Mary? you might ask. It all boils down to the name that Mary is instructed to give her child. “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Remember the translation of “Jesus” – God saves. For those of us who have placed our faith in Jesus, all of the predictions that the prophets make lead us to the stable in Bethlehem. Jesus is the one who can bring about the justice and the reversals of power and the reconciliation to which the prophets called us.

Many years ago Lutheran pastor Larry Hoffsis summed up his belief that Zephaniah's promises had been fulfilled in Christ. He wrote: "The King of Israel, present in our midst, as we gather around the table; God's judgements removed by the peace with God offered by the outstretched and nail printed hands of our Lord; our enemies cast out at the empty tomb and the last enemy, death; destroyed; our hands and hearts strengthened and made courageous down through the centuries by Christ's abiding presence; the church caught up in the song of victory by the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven (*Interpretation Commentary*, p. 87)."

And yet, clearly the work is not complete. We are still a mess. We know that Jesus came, we trust that he is coming again – but it is still hard to claim the peace that he offers. That's because of all those circumstances that Brennan Manning alluded to in the reading I began with this morning. I think one of the things that gives me so much strength in those words is the permission Manning gives us to feel the way we feel, and to look even deeper than current circumstances for a peace that is offered regardless of them, whatever they are. That is a huge challenge, but when we are renewed in the love of God, we are also restored to hope in God's promises. That's the deal.

Larry Hoffsis touches on this idea of the future and the hope we can claim for it in the same sermon I just read from. I'll close with his final words: "The prophet's words are fulfilled in Christ. Even so, there remains for us, too, the element of the future about them. Certainly all is not past in Christ. He points us to his coming again. He is in our midst now, of that we can be assured. But there is a nearer presence still to come, when we shall have our final homecoming with God. That will be a greater celebration, a higher festival than when the prodigal returned." Amen and amen. Peace of Christ to you.