

BIBLE READINGS: Zephaniah 3:14-20 Luke 3:7-18

SERMON

Let me introduce you to the book of Zephaniah. Zephaniah means God protects. He is one of the minor prophets – but minor only in length – not in substance. Zephaniah's prophecy is limited to three chapters, just 55 verses. His lineage is traced back four generations. That's a little strange if you know the prophets! Others go back two generations. Zephaniah goes back four.

The text begins: "The word of the Lord came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah." Three of those names mean very little to us. But the last one rings a bell. Hezekiah was king in Judah from 725-696 BC. Hezekiah was an outstanding leader. In fact, 2 Kings 18 says of him:

"He did what was right in the sight of the Lord. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah." Zephaniah the prophet may have been a great-great grandson of this great-great king!

If so, he had royalty in his veins. Hezekiah was followed by two kings who did not follow his lead - Manasseh and Amon, both of whom "did what was evil in the sight of God." Josiah, the boy king, followed Amon and brought great reform to the nation. It was during his reign that Zephaniah preached. Initially, Zephaniah was supportive of Josiah's reform, but he knew in his heart that it was too little, too late.

Zephaniah saw exile coming, and he could not keep silent. Eighty percent of his prophecy is bad news. And yet, the concluding verses end on a note of joy. (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

If you know Zephaniah, you know the last words of the text are out of character for him. In fact, he's one of the gloomiest, dooziest of the Old Testament prophets. It's no wonder we know so little about him. He looks and sounds a little more like the Grinch who stole Christmas than the prophet who promised it.

But at least, he's an Equal Opportunity Prophet! Zephaniah not only calls out Judah, he pronounces judgement on all the nations! Indeed, on all of creation. Let me give you a little taste.

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth", says the Lord.

'I will sweep away humans and animals.

I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.

I will make the wicked stumble.

I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth."

Try putting that on a Christmas card! If he were around today, Zephaniah would be dismissed as a loose cannon, a disturber of the peace!

But Zephaniah saved his harshest rebuke for Judah. There were four sins in particular he targets.

- Religious Syncretism. The blending of different belief systems, as though they were all equal. In the temple, not only were they worshipping Yahweh, they were bowing before Canaanite fertility gods.
- Secondly, there was Political Corruption. "The judges are like ravenous wolves," says Zephaniah, "who leave only the bones of their prey for the morning."
- Thirdly, there was Moral Injustice. Men and women who were said to be without conscience and without shame.
- And lastly, Spiritual Complacency. They had become indifferent, apathetic, agnostic. "The Lord will neither do good, nor will He do harm," they said. Indeed, God is irrelevant.

In chapter 1, verse 12, Zephaniah thunders away: "On the day of the Lord, I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will He do harm.'" It's interesting that the word for dregs means thicken or congeal. The term comes from the wine-making process, in which new wine was left to stand with the dregs or the sediment of the grapes long enough to enhance the wine's colour and body. But it had to be drawn off before the wine became too thick and syrupy. Zephaniah is saying that His people have become like wine that has sat too long in the sediment and become congealed, complacent, syrupy, and spoiled.

The result of their complacency was disastrous. Jerusalem became easy pickings for Babylon, who promptly deported them into exile into an unpromised land.

Exile, I think, is a metaphor for the human condition. Exile is a prolonged separation from one's country or community.

Exile is estrangement from one's vision of how life was supposed to be. Exile is a picture of grief and brokenness brought on by loss.

For the child of God, exile is never the last word. The final word of the prophet is not one of sin and judgement; it's not one of gloom and doom, darkness and despair. The final word is one of joy & salvation, restoration and homecoming. In chapter 3, verse 14, Zephaniah changes his tune.

*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout O Israel.
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgements against you.*

He has turned away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

Why this sudden shift in Zephaniah? Why this sudden burst of joy? The situation hasn't changed. The circumstance hasn't been altered. They're still in exile. They are still far from home! So why joy? It's because the prophet knows that Yahweh is not stuck in the holy city! God is not restricted to Jerusalem, to a fallen temple. God is not restricted to a declining institution or a denomination. God comes to us in our exile! And His presence changes our darkness into light, sorrow into singing, exile into exaltation, and brings us home.

The great good news today is that home is not just a place, it's a relationship. The One whose birth is promised by prophets will be called Emmanuel, which means God with us. God is our home! God is our place! And His presence turns our grief into joy.

Teilhard de Chardin once said, "The infallible proof of the presence of God is joy." I believe that's true. In a world that is still fractured by hate, hostility, division, and exile, Zephaniah the prophet speaks good news:

"The King of Kings is in your midst and the result is joy!"

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