

Bible Tuesday for Advent III, 2018

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; 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. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

The book of Zephaniah is a curious one. It seems to be an amalgamation of prophecies from the time of Josiah, the second to last king of Judah before it was conquered by Babylonia, and post-exilic writings. Scholars are conflicted on Zephaniah's origins and meanings. Much of the prophecy describes Judah as an idolatrous faithful group but other writings describe King Josiah as very faithful to God, tearing down the "high places" altars to Baal and Ashera/Astartes, and reestablishing worship rites in the Temple.

The above verses conclude Zephaniah's prophecy. They depict the ultimate messiah, God Himself! God is the forgiver, the restorer, the victorious warrior king. Verse 18 is very difficult to translate, with many different renderings. "I will take away from you the woe over which you endured mockery," (The Jewish Study Bible) is quite different from the above "I will remove disaster from you so that you will not bear reproach for it."

These last verses in the first person, spoken in the voice of God, speak of a future time of restoration after the Babylonian exile.

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

The verses immediately preceding these prophesy of a time when God will dry up the Euphrates and bring Israelites out of captivity in Assyrian just as he brought all Israel out of Egypt across the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds.

These verses are written as Israel's response to this prophesied freedom. Phrases from Psalms of victory and other celebratory hymns are woven into this passage. Note the admonishments to broadcast God's wondrous works to "the nations" which in Hebrew means, to "everyone who isn't Israelite."

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

These are the concluding verses of Paul's letter to the congregation in Philippi. There are lots of reasons the folks in Philippi might worry. Jews in the lands occupied by Rome were at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, so they lived hand to mouth and worked very hard. In addition, Christians were not favored by Jews or Romans in Philippi, so they were social and religious outcasts. Yet, Paul adjures them to pray to God about everything in gratitude. The "peace of God" is a phrase which means completeness in God, wholeness in God, absolutely contentment granted by God. Somehow, God gifts of absolute safety and satiation protects us in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Israelites who had lived as slaves in Egypt refused to humble themselves to God despite being brought out of slavery by miracle after miracle, but kept complaining against God and Moses. As a result, God would not let them reenter Canaan, the Promised Land, but made the Israelites to wander the desert until that generation died off and the next generation was led

into Canaan by Joshua. Joshua led the Israelites out of the wilderness into Canaan by crossing the Jordan River right near Jericho. As the Israelites waded through the Jordan River, they were ceremonially washed and made ritually clean as they entered God's Promised Land.

John the Baptist went to that same spot in the Jordan River and called all Israel to himself to ritually bathe again, not to reenter Canaan, but rather in preparation to see God face to face. This is not the baptism Jesus commands, but rather a baptism of repentance. Israelites are called to confess their sins, wash them away in the river, and then live newly committed lives, just as their ancestors did as they followed Joshua through the river. John the Baptist's anger seems to come from false repentance. "Live lives worthy of repentance!" Repent is not the same thing as confession. Repentance means to see the error in your way and change course. John was calling out all those false confessions where no life changes were made.

Note how John describes Jesus: winnowing fork in hand to separate worthy from waste. Jesus tells a similar parable of separating sheep from goats, but for Jesus, this is a prophecy of end times.