

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSV)

A Song of Joy

- ¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
- ¹⁵ 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.
- ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
- ¹⁷ 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
- ¹⁸ as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
- ¹⁹ 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.
- ²⁰ 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 Lord Is in Our Midst

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: December 17, 2006

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Text: *Zephaniah 3:14-20*

From time immemorial human beings have turned to stories to explain what otherwise seems unexplainable. Today's scripture from the prophet Zephaniah is one of those things that's hard to explain. The setting is Jerusalem sometime between the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jeremiah. To say it another way, it's after Jerusalem knew her days were numbered, but before the Babylonians had brought the city to its knees. Jerusalem could read the handwriting on the wall. She had a terminal diagnosis. It was just a matter of time. There was nothing much good on her horizon.

Zephaniah has spent the whole first chapter of his short work explaining to Jerusalem just exactly why she deserves the fate that awaits her. He speaks for God, "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem." The first two chapters are filled with fiery rhetoric of vengeance at the hand of an angry God. And then comes chapter 3. God is still spewing angry testaments, but then God also seems to have second thoughts. God starts debating with himself. God says, speaking to the people, "Surely you will fear me; you will accept correction." But then, God reflects to himself, "All the more they were eager to make all their deeds corrupt." God admits to himself that the fury isn't working. And then suddenly God breaks into song,

¹⁵ 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.

Makes you want to say, "Whoa, God, you're all over the place here. Take a deep breath and get a hold on yourself." But God keeps right on going, bold grand promises expressed in the beautiful language of song and poetry. God promises to restore the people's fortunes before their very eyes. He will save the lame and gather the outcast. He will bring them home and gather them together. It is such a lovely passage. But how are we to make sense of it? How do we square God's anger and disappointment with the declaration to be in our midst and the promise of restoration?

In the fourth century the great bishop Athanasius was trying to give a Christian answer to just such a question. He told something like the following story to explain God's dilemma and actions.

[Once upon a time there was a good and kind king who had a great kingdom with many cities. In one distant city, some people took advantage of the freedom the king gave them and started doing evil. They profited by their evil and began to fear that the king would interfere and throw them in jail. Eventually these rebels seethed with hatred for the king. They convinced the city that everyone would be better off without the king, and the city declared its independence from the kingdom.

But soon, with everyone doing whatever they wanted, disorder reigned in the city. There was violence, hatred, lying, oppression, murder, rape, slavery, and fear. The king thought; What should I do? If I take my army and conquer the city by force, the people will fight against me, and I'll have to kill so many of them, and the rest will only submit through fear or intimidation, which will make them hate me and all I stand for even more. How does that help them—to be either dead or imprisoned or secretly seething with rage? But if I leave them alone, they'll destroy each other, and it breaks my heart to think of the pain they're causing and experiencing.

So the king did something very surprising. He took off his robes and dressed in the rags of a homeless wanderer. Incognito, he entered the city and began living in a vacant lot near a garbage dump. He took up a trade—fixing broken pottery and furniture. Whenever people came to him, his kindness and goodness and fairness and respect were so striking that they would linger just to be in his presence. They would tell him their fears and questions, and ask his advice. He told them that the rebels had fooled them, and that the true king had a better way to live, which he exemplified and taught. One by one, then two by two, and then by the hundreds, people began to have confidence in him and live in his way.

Their influence spread to others, and the movement grew and grew until the whole city regretted its rebellion and wanted to return to the kingdom again. But, ashamed of their horrible mistake, they were afraid to approach the king, believing he would certainly destroy them for their rebellion. But the king-in-disguise told them the good news: he was himself the king, and he loved them. He held nothing against them, and he welcomed them back into his kingdom, having accomplished by a gentle, subtle presence what never could have been accomplished through brute force.]¹

This is a lovely story for Christmas, of God come among us in humble form, full of love and forgiveness, to make something new out of us. It is a little optimistic, though, don't you think? People just haven't changed that much yet, have they? So, maybe we need a different ending for the story. Maybe it should go like this.

In our new story the kingdom is more complicated. Not only have some of the leaders of the king's kingdom developed and encouraged evil ways. But the king's kingdom has been conquered by another, much larger power, too, an empire with an emperor. And that huge power has told the people of the kingdom that they would be allowed to stay on the land so long as they didn't cause any trouble.

The king did the same thing he did before. He took off his robes and dressed in the rags of a homeless wanderer. Incognito, he entered the city and began living in a vacant lot near a garbage dump. He took up a trade—fixing broken pottery and furniture. All the same as before. And, whenever people came to him, his kindness and goodness and fairness and respect were so striking that they would linger just to be in his presence. They would tell him their fears and questions, and ask his advice. He told them that the rebels had fooled them, and that the true king had a better way to live, which he exemplified and taught. One by one, then two by two, and then by the hundreds, people began to have confidence in him and live in his way.

The same as before. But now the story changes. The hundreds of people who were coming to him caught the notice of the leaders of the evil-doers and the profiteers of the kingdom. They began to talk among themselves. They said, "Do you see what is happening?"

¹between the brackets from: Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 57-8.

People are going to this beggar, and he is filling their heads with very dangerous ideas. Why, if people really start doing the things he's talking about, our profits are going to dry up. We're going to lose our grip on the people. And not only that. Do you see how unruly they are. Why, they're nothing but street rabble. They have no manners, no sense of dignity. And some of them are even saying that this rough beggar is the old king. That would be a funny joke if it weren't so dangerous. The emperor doesn't like trouble-makers, and then when he finds out that some people are calling this idiot a king, it's going to be all over."

And so some of these leaders contacted the emperor's local governor and explained the situation. "For all our sakes, we need to kill him," they said. And that's just what they did.

But then the strangest thing happened. Many people said that they saw the old beggar even after he was dead and buried. The leaders had hoped the whole thing would go away once the beggar was out of the picture. But it didn't happen that way.

More and more people came to believe that the old beggar had been the real thing, the king. They remembered all the things he had told people, things about love and forgiveness and humility. They remembered how he had those qualities himself right to the end. He even forgave his executioners. And then more and more people said that even though he was no longer alive, they still felt his presence.

Over the years and the centuries, the stories about the king continued, and those who believed in him grew in number. At the same time, evil-doers and profiteers did not go away either. Many others who tried to live by the old king's ways were killed. Lots of times his way seemed futile. Some even claimed to follow his way, but they were actually evil-doers themselves.

But one thing all the evil-doers could not do was get rid of this presence of the old king. Many people continued to experience it. Even as struggles persisted, there could be found rising out of the din beautiful songs of hope. And every year, at around this time, his followers commemorated the old king's birth as a celebration that he was still in their midst. Even now you can hear the soft strains of the music inviting us to sing the story. ... [hymn follows immediately]