

JUDGMENT AND JOY

Zephaniah 3:9 - 20
Luke 3:7-18

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TEXT: Zephaniah 3:14-15 “sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgment against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.”

PURPOSE: To call for the joy which arises out of recognizing the rightness of divine judgment and experiencing being saved from that judgment.

“God rest ye, merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay, remember Christ your Savior was born on Christmas day.” ‘Oh, tidings of judgment and joy, judgment and joy, Oh, tidings of judgment and joy.’ Wait a minute! I thought the alterations of the words of our beloved hymns were only supposed to get rid of too much maleness. Maybe we can tolerate replacing “gentlemen” with “gentlefolk”, but who wants to exchange comfort for judgment? Why in the world would anyone want to do that? Well, here’s another Christmas song which, unaltered, speaks of judgment: “You’d better watch out, you’d better not cry, you’d better not pout, I’m telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town! He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows if you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness’ sake!” There’s the dark underside of Christmas, the judgment which looms, and which, when properly administered, serves the frazzled parents of small children well: if you don’t behave, Santa won’t bring you any presents. That song, by the way, also has its rewrite, perhaps inspired by John the Baptist: “You’d better watch out, you’d better not cry, you’d better not pout, I’m telling you why: Jesus Christ is coming to town!”

Today is the “joy” Sunday of Advent. In the midst of Advent’s call to careful preparation, and its songs in minor keys, comes this day that invites Christmas rejoicing two weeks before the day itself. The Old Testament prophet Zephaniah gets it, calling his hearers to “sing aloud, shout, rejoice with all your heart!” And Paul, writing to the Christians in Philippi, gets it, inviting them to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Because, “the Lord is near!” (Philippians 4:4) But there is John the Baptist, ranting and raving, dressing people down for their hypocrisy and presumptions of privilege, setting himself up as an anti-joy kind of fanatic. And John didn’t stop with himself: he assured the people that the Messiah would come with the purpose of gathering the wheat and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. Joy for anyone regarded as wheat; no comfort whatsoever for those who are judged to be chaff. You’d better watch out: Jesus Christ is coming to town!

Who is this John guy? The Grinch who stole Christmas? No, John the Baptist

is more like the three ghosts who visited Ebenezer Scrooge. Isn't it interesting? We love the story of Scrooge, even though it is full of judgment. One spirit shows Scrooge a sister who loved him, and an employer of generous heart. Another shows him the Cratchit family, barely existing on his paltry pay, and Tiny Tim, loved and loving but nonetheless withering away. And the last spirit shows him the dreadful consequence of his current way of life: himself buried in a neglected grave, a man forgotten except for his legendary stinginess. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future didn't judge Scrooge: they merely took the old curmudgeon to places which moved him to judge himself. Judgment is the core of Dickens' story, and without it, there would be no story.

We got unbridled joy from the prophet Zephaniah this morning. But if you read his book, you will see that he plays the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, all rolled into one, with more threat of judgment in the little collection of his prophecies than you'll find in any other three chapters of scripture. Zephaniah warns of the coming "great day of the Lord," "a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Zephaniah 1:15) The old requiem mass for the dead included a piece inspired by Zechariah's vision.¹ How's that for dishing up a heap of judgement right when our grieving most wants comfort? Zephaniah does finish with a stirring song of joy, and I'll get to that soon enough. But the bulk of his message is more "you'd better watch out," than "tidings of comfort and joy," more like John the Baptist than like Dickens' jolly ghost of Christmas Present.

Scrooge on Christmas morning is like those who, in response to John's dire warnings, asked, "What should we do?" Standing at his grave with the ghost of Christmas future, Scrooge cried out: "I am not the man I was. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."² For John's hearers, and for Zephaniah's, just like for Scrooge, the threat of judgment creates the conditions for conversion, conversion not so much of belief as of behavior.

¹You can hear Mozart's version of "Dies Irae, Dies Illa" at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_YSEbAWA0Y

²A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, Bantam Books, New York, 1983, p. 71.

“You want to avoid the axe?” John asks. “Then bear good fruit. And this specifically is what I mean: share what you have. Be fair in your business dealings. And don’t use your power for personal gain.”

When Scrooge awoke from his night with the ghosts, he had no idea at first how long he had been among the spirits. When he learned from a passing boy that it was Christmas Day, he was gleeful. For the repentant Scrooge, the great Day of the Lord was no longer a day of wrath, but had become a day of salvation and of giddy rejoicing, because he was not past all hope.

In a journal I receive which gives me ideas for preaching, the editor, Erskine Clarke, writes in the current edition that, “as Advent and Christmas approach . . . we become aware how difficult it is for us to know joy. To be sure, we know pleasure and gratification and thrills and contentment, but joy – a rushing delight that flows from gratitude – is elusive. And if joy is elusive, rejoicing seems even more so. For rejoicing involves us, us together as a community, and not simply me.”³ Scrooge addresses Clarke’s lament head on. His joy is grateful response to his conversion. In his uncontrolled delight, he follows Zephaniah’s instructions, and for exactly the reason Zephaniah gave: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! For the Lord has taken away the judgments against you.” (Zeph 3:14-15) The joy of the faithful is the joy of those who have experienced God’s salvation overcoming the judgments against us. It is the joy of the child who didn’t watch out, who cried and pouted and drove his mother half crazy the whole month of December, but found presents under the tree nonetheless.

The story of Jesus born in that stable in Bethlehem is without question a story of comfort and joy. Look at a nativity scene, as we were treated to many treasured creches here yesterday, and the looking draws us into serenity, into mystery, into wonder, and that is exactly what they are designed to do. But the angels told the shepherds that the “good news of great joy” was that to us is born “a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11) If the good news is that God has sent us a Savior, that means that we are in need of saving. And right here is why the good news includes news of judgment, because, if there were no judgments against us, we would not be needing a Savior to overcome those judgments. No wonder Erskine Clarke speaks of joy as elusive, and communal rejoicing as rare. If we do not believe that

³ *Journal for Preachers, Advent 2009; Volume XXXIII number 1, p. 1.*

there is warrant for the spirits to reveal ourselves to us, as they came to reveal Scrooge to himself, then why would we rejoice, as the carol sings it, that we are saved “from Satan’s power when we had gone astray”? The joy which faith in Jesus Christ evokes is not a synonym for happiness or pleasure. It is the proper response to the news that God is delivering us from evil through the gracious gift of God’s own Son, the Savior of the world.

I don’t like judgment anymore than anyone else, but let’s face it: our world would benefit from some spirits showing us what a mess we’ve made and giving us a chance to mend our ways. We are a world at war, up to our necks in brutality and injustice in more places than almost anyone can name. We are a world which could provide enough of life’s basics for every person, and yet, the distance between those who have and those who don’t grows at a rate which even the old Scrooge might find offensive. We live in the most prosperous country on earth, and yet, homeless people seek the shelter of this church and now dozens like it across the country simply because we lack the will as a nation to do as Scrooge did in response to the grace that he had received. The good news that Jesus Christ is born is news that we can be different in the future from how we have been in the past and the present. The good news of a Savior come to us is news of one making a way for the world to get off its road to ruin. And here’s the thing about joy, about joyful response to our salvation: the more we realize the severity of the judgment against us, the more we will rejoice that God has taken it away.

One more thing, arising from the way Zephaniah gets from judgment to joy. They way Zephaniah tells it, the judgment against humanity is repealed not because people did something to deserve this, but because of the sovereign grace of God. “The Lord has repealed your sentence; the Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no longer. God is taking away your misfortune, and you will not have to bear the disgrace of it. God is going to exult with joy over you, God will love you to renewal, God will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day of festival.”⁴ Zephaniah saw that God’s salvation comes as a free gift, not as a reward for good behavior. True to that insight, Christ the Savior is born, not because the world deserves him, but because the world needs him, because the world has tried and failed to save itself.

⁴This is my rendering of verses from Zephaniah chapter 3, based on the New Revised and Jerusalem translations.

So, yes, tidings of judgment, and comfort, and most of all joy, real joy that is exuberant response to what God has done for us. Tidings of people who express their joy as Scrooge expressed his: in healed relationships with our families, with those who work for us, and with our neighbors with whom it is our joyful privilege to share from the bounty we have received. Tidings of God still at work in our hearts as well as in our world, doing whatever it takes to prove to us our need for a Savior, and rejoicing with us when we receive that Savior and let him change our lives.