

SERMON: “Restoration and Renewal”

First United Church, Waterloo – ADVENT III – Sunday, December 12, 2021

PRAYER: “Ever-creating, ever-loving God, may your Word and your Spirit reach us this day and take root in hearts and spirits that we may be encouraged and moved to persist in faith and in our dedication to travel in your ways, and live into your future of promise.” Amen

I’m pretty sure I only know one family who has a child named Zephaniah. One of my American cousins and her husband selected that name for one of their offspring. I’m also pretty sure that many Jews and Christians aren’t that familiar with the work and words of the biblical prophet named Zephaniah. But he’s worth a listen and some serious reflection. He’s considered a minor prophet not because he’s less significant than Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel; but because, like Amos, Joel, Obadiah, and others, his “book” as such is shorter. One, two, three chapters – zip, he’s done. Yet, his message from God has huge impact. The first two and half chapters pack a wallop. The last part of chapter three reverses that course. Here’s how Bible scholar O. Palmer Robertson has described it:

“One of the most awesome descriptions of the wrath of God in judgment found anywhere in Scripture appears in the opening verses of Zephaniah One of the most moving descriptions of the love of God for God’s people found anywhere in Scripture appears in the closing verses of Zephaniah.” 1

I HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Zephaniah’s career as a prophet took place during the reign of Josiah, ruler of Judah from 640-609 BCE. Josiah came to the throne at a young age but quickly grew wise and capable. He picked up on the advice his court advisers gave him in his early years and undertook a comprehensive reform program aimed at restoring God-centred living in the land. Through previous rulers the realm of Judah had gone increasingly toward hell in a hand-basket through political and economic corruption, cultural immoralities, and idolatry. It didn’t last much after Josiah died. Despite Josiah’s efforts, Zephaniah intuited disaster was still on the horizon. His early prophecies warned of ruin and devastation in the form of a takeover by the armies of Babylon, the most recent superpower in the Ancient Near East at the time. By the time Josiah came to the throne of Judah, Babylon was fast becoming the new superpower in the Ancient Near East. Zephaniah preached that God would use Babylon as an instrument of divine judgment. *“I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem”* Judah would wind up over-run by Babylon and most of its citizens would be taken away into captivity and exile. And while God was busy reprimanding Judah, other nations would also eventually bear the brunt of God’s displeasure.

Then, after at time lapse of around fifty years, Babylon too will be brought low. During the days of exile a remnant of captive Israelites will recover faithfulness . So when we catch the drift of the prophet's words in the closing verses of chapter 3, there's a huge shift towards divine compassion and forgiveness. Words that must have come from the mouth of another prophet acting in the spirit of Zephaniah during the days of exile. Words about having their sentence of punishment commuted and overturned; words about God's presence among them being re-established: *"God will quiet you in love."*; words about God actually bursting into song and rejoicing, maybe even break-dancing; and words about clearing the way for the exiles to return home and rebuild community -- such is the nature of the words we find and hear in Zephaniah 3:14-20. Words like: *"Rejoice and exult with all your heart ..."* (vs. 14); *"God is in your midst and God will renew you in divine love."* (vs. 17); *"I will remove disaster from you."* (v. 18); *"I will bring you home ... and make you renowned and praised (throughout the earth) when I restore your fortunes"* (vs. 20)

What's with that? Well, it's an indication that such a God is not mushy and sentimental. Such a God feels deep pain and heartache because of human rebelliousness and disregard. Such a God can become angry with all that and appear to lash back. However, such a God can never stay stuck in that anger for very long for God's truer and better nature always finds expression in mercy and compassion. Take these comments from Jin Han, professor of biblical studies, NY Theological Seminary who says that such shifts in the heart and activity of God *"remind us of a fascinating exchange recorded in the Talmud. A question is raised as to whether God prays. 'What does God pray?'" According to Rav (Abba Arika) in the portion of the Talmud called "Berakhot," God prays, "May my mercy overcome my wrath!" (b. Berakhot 7a). In other words, God prays that divine desire for compassion be greater than divine demand for justice."* 2

II OUR PRESENT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

And we are encouraged to believe and experience God similarly in our own historical context. As people of faith we have been accustomed to imagining God in the image of a Parent. Maybe we can detect God showing up in our lives like that. I recall several times at our family dinner table when as a child I acted out. For some reason I became snarly, huffed and puffed, rolled my eyes, shook my head as if to say "I don't care!" And Dad, sometimes Mom, said, "Then, go to your room!" And off I went into temporary exile. Secretly, I consoled myself saying, "My room! Good, that's where all my stuff is!" But gnawing bad feelings didn't go away. Sooner or later, I became contrite and apologetic; or maybe Dad or Mom came by to check up on me: "So, how are you doing?" And within a few minutes family harmony was restored through mercy and compassion. Repeatedly throughout Bible times and history ever since, that's the story of God and humanity. God creates and provides and offers wisdom and guidance to people to live blissful and productive lives;

but, at times they take God's provision and care for granted, become snarly or just neglectful. They kind of huff and puff expelling air, give an unholy roll or two with their eyes and wag their defiant heads as if to tell God to go take a hike. And God as Parent can excel at tough love and distance us from God's presence sending us off on own self-induced hike into exile, spiritual exile at least. We are given room to come to our senses, admit our failing, and find out that in our discomfort God has been deeply discomforted too. And God makes the divine move to restore us into space and place of right relationship. Even if we don't do very much, if anything, to deserve it. As Parent, God is miffed by our bad behaviour and waywardness, might even hate that. but that does not stop God from loving us because we are nonetheless God's children. In *Hope Has Its Reasons*, author Becky Pippert offer this perspective:
"God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but a settled opposition to the cancer of rebelliousness which is eating out the insides of the human race God loves with God's whole being." 3
 God can't stop God's self from loving not only those few who are truly lovable, the many who are lovable sometimes, and even those who are more toxic than lovable. Such is the world God so loves to which God gives God's only-begotten offspring.

And here we are now in a world engulfed in a time of exile: the Covid-19 Captivity. And there are some armchair analysts who claim it's a hoax; and some alarmists who claim the virus was created by some terrorist group and released into animals in China as an act of germ warfare; and some religious and non-religious soap-box speakers who claim it is divine punishment. In past decades there was a popular method of Biblical scholarship called historical criticism. It talked about the biblical story as within the framework of a holy God's activity in history. That approach was captured by a German term for holy history: *"Heilsgeschichte"*. When I catch wind of those wilder theories about Covid-19, I categorize them with my own made-up German term: *"Bullgeschichte"*. The Covid-19 pandemic is a naturally-based outbreak of a rampant, mutating virus. Where do we notice, intuit, or recognize God still busy making holy history in our midst? In our yearnings for release from captivity, for time and space to address all the troubles that have been more and more exposed in this "wilderness" time, where is God present and active in the midst of the world God still loves? Are the signs or inklings of restoration and renewal not only on the horizon, but already in process? Already preparing God's way in the wilderness that Rose Ann lifted up for us last week? Where is God calling us to get ready for some rejoicing? At the end of April this year, you may recall how one hungering advertiser imagined it:
[play Extra gum ad]
 I don't know. When the days of more truly safe human interactions do become possible, they may not be characterized by lots of hugs, kisses, and embraces. Indeed, those who have already at times risked dipping into such waters, have generally been part of setting off another wave of mass infection.

Even when do emerge more fully from guarded isolation into public interactions,
I suspect we will be wearing masks for a while.

What I am noticing, what fills me with hope and anticipatory joy are these very real possibilities:
Major improvements in how we manage and offer long-term healthcare will happen.

An economic revolution that will embrace the opportunity for everyone to have a livable income;
readjust trade barriers and create a fairer form of global marketplace could happen,
and maybe even dare to dive into debt cancellation and start all over again from scratch.

A sustained and more concerted effort to turn back Global warming
and restore damaged environments will be a priority.

Also high on the socio-politico-cultural priority list will be overcoming racism,
and pursuing the objectives of reconciliation with aboriginal peoples.

And it's quite likely that working from home, online learning, and consulting and meeting
will be part of the new normal.

Hopefully, that will happen in such a way as to enable us all to make better use of our
“spare time” for personal creative and/or athletic pursuits, quality time in our relationships,
and intentional time for spiritual practice and spiritual growth.

And in all of this, I perceive God's presence and transforming power engaged.

CONCLUSION

And as it unfolds, God too will be singing, and dancing, and rejoicing with us,
because that's all part of God's grand vision of bringing us all back “Home”
in harmonious inter-relationship with ourselves, others, creation, and Divine Power.

The pattern we can detect in the biblical story, keeps on repeating itself in human history.
Slowly and progressively creation is becoming a better place.

The pattern, however, isn't smooth:

God provides, people rebel, people wind up in some form of exile,
some way of being distanced from God and God's intentions,
and then there is renewal and restoration.

Zephaniah's prophetic words still make their appeal
to the hearts and minds of God's children today:

*“ ‘And I will raise up the lame and gather the outcast,
I will change their shame into praise and renown in the earth.
At that time I will bring you home, at that time I will gather you:
for I will make you renowned and praised among all peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,’ says your God.”*

I don't know that they were intentional about it
when my American cousin and her husband named their children,
but this divine vision is imaged in them.

Zephaniah, their youngest, has two older sisters,
the first is Emma, which comes from an Old German word meaning “Universe”,
and the second sister is Zoe, which is the Greek word for “Life”

Life for the Universe; wholeness and fullness of life for the Universe that's what the God of the biblical Zephaniah is ultimately determined to be about. I should also let you know that Zeph's, and Emma's, and Zoe's parents are a doctor and a midwife. They know a fair bit about birthing. So does God, such hope and promise all came to us bundled in joy ages ago in Bethlehem. Such a God is no distant cosmic clock-maker, nor Unmoved Mover, Kathryn Schifferdecker, Old Testament professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN offers these words that we can take to heart:

"...this God is moved, is deeply affected, by human attitudes and actions. This God does not watch from a distance, but enters into the life of the world. This God enters even into human flesh, in the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation. This Sunday, we speak of joy, the joy of a people redeemed and restored, but also the joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world. God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And we, we who are wondrously and inexplicably God's beloved, join in the celebration." 4

How great the joy! How great our joy!

Notes

1 Robertson, O. Palmer, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), page 344.

2 Jin H. Han, Prof. of Biblical Studies, New York Theo. Sem. NY, workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-Sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-zephaniah-314-20-4.

3 Becky Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, (Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL: 2001), Chapter 6, page 99 or so.

4 Kathryn Schifferdecker, workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-Sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-zephaniah-314-20-2.