

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS

The Gift of Giving

TEXT: Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Luke 3:7-18

The prophet Zephaniah greets us with shouts of joy! “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” I want to stand up and sing the “Hallelujah Chorus”. We are so used to prophets shouting of judgment and doom, that we really take notice when we hear words of rejoicing from God. And this joy is not subdued; it is not quiet or dignified. The Hebrew words describe it as great jubilation. We are accustomed to the prophets giving us images of God as judge, or images of God as shepherd, gathering the flock into the fold. But how often do we imagine God as one who rejoices? One who sings? But here it is: God and God’s people alike are caught up in a joy that overflows into song, a joy that springs from love renewed, relationships restored.

So we move into the Gospel of Luke and continue the tale of the whacky John the Baptist. But now, instead of his exhortations to be prepared, and compared to his previous warnings about judgment, redemption, retribution and forgiveness, his words for today seem pretty mild. In response to the crowds understandable reaction to John’s warning of last week to “be prepared”, they are now asking “What shall we do?”

And John basically tells them that they ought to be honest (“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you”), be kind (“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise”) and he tells them to work hard (“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages”).

“Come on, John”, I’m tempted to ask, “is that really all? This is pretty much what we learned in kindergarten. Is this really all it takes to avoid judgment and enter into

paradise?" Just honesty, kindness and hard work? Apparently, according to John, the answer is, *Yes!*

Perhaps John is saying that it's more than everything. John implies that the coming of the Christ affects every dimension of our lives, including how we regard each other and our ethical obligations to one another and to the world. The kingdom, that is, doesn't show up only in grand actions or heroic deeds, but it comes in the simple acts of sharing what we have, being honest with each other, and working hard and resisting the urge to be bullies.

We honor the Christ by the intangible gifts that we give to each other and to the rest of the world. Yes, I know that we don't bring the kingdom, God does. But it seems like one of the chief ways through which we can witness to God's coming kingdom is to actually live like it's here, like we believe it's really coming, like we think it actually matters.

Sometimes that's hard to do, especially when we read today's world headlines, look around at what's happening in our communities, or wring our hands at the state of our nation. God has given to humankind the gift of life and the gift of God's eternal presence in our lives. But God does expect something in return. We are expected to practice justice and ethical probity, meaning, for example, judging fairly under the law, caring for the less fortunate, accepting refugees and others in need. We have the opportunity to be the ordinary saints that John calls us to be. And just so we don't think our everyday actions of being honest, kind, and hardworking don't matter, ask yourself this: What would it look like if the political candidates running for high office acted this way? What about our elected leaders? Or some of our law enforcement officers? I suspect our world work a whole lot better.

But let's not stop here. Let's get more personal. What would it look like if we went out from church today looking for opportunities to be honest, kind and hardworking? What if we were determined to seek out such opportunities because we've heard that extraordinary acts of grace are within the reach of ordinary people? What if we believed – and acted on the belief – that being honest, kind and hardworking in a culture that is impatient, immature and fearful really makes a difference? What kind of gifts would we be to the world around us if we could all live, or at least try to live, by the standards as set by God?

Keep in mind where we are in time – less than two weeks shy of Christmas, but living in a nation and world constantly afraid that the next terrorist crime or random act of violence will happen around our street corner. And because of this fear we change how we live and, at times, even risk forgetting who we are. And when we do that, the terrorists win. So what might happen if we pledged that in light of the dangerous world we live in we intended to redouble our efforts to be honest, kind and hardworking, meeting the needs of those around us, reaching out to help those who struggle, and in all these ways witness to our confidence that Jesus' life, death and resurrection make a difference? I think what would happen is that we would not only have a demonstrably better world, but also a more vibrant church, one animated by John's conviction that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God".

The Prophet Zephaniah led us to shouts of joy and great jubilation. God has given humankind the gift of a restored relationship. The love between God and Israel has been renewed. He even uses the biblical metaphor that pictures the relationship between God and Israel as a love affair, a marriage. Today the Advent focus is on joy, and our prophet depicts God as the one who bursts into song with joy over God's beloved: "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". God's gifts to us are love and joy.

Our Gospel writer then tells us that, according to John, the coming of the Christ will be God's greatest gift to the world and that the values of honesty, kindness and hard work will become the norms for the kingdom. Through his actions and words John is telling us that Christmas is not all about the material things of this world. That Christmas is about giving and sharing, especially to those who are poor who cannot repay our generosity. Christmas is also about repentance and changing our ways for the better.

The consumer and gadget driven world are slowly taking from us the true essence of Christmas. We must not allow it to succeed. We must continue to focus our attention on the coming birth of Jesus, because this is the true spirit and essence of Christmas that Luke wants us all to live.

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. Amen