

Bible Study
Advent 3, Year C
December 13, 2015

[RCL] Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Zephaniah 3:14-20

In these final verses from his book, the Prophet Zephaniah gives us an exultant vision of the restoration of the People of God. The Lord has “taken away the judgments against [them];” that is, he has pardoned them and released them. And that is only the beginning. In a particularly striking verse, the prophet evocatively describes how, just as Israel should rejoice in the Lord, the Lord will rejoice over them. And yet, this restoration still remains, for the prophet, a promise to be fulfilled in the future. In a series of first-person declarations, the Lord promises that he “will” save his people, turn their situation around, and make them great among the nations, and all before their very eyes. Coming at the end of a book of woes and denunciations, this closing passage truly seems like a light at the end of a tunnel.

- How do these promises and joys relate to us, the Church, now that the Gentiles have been grafted into the People of God?
- Where do we, as the Church, see ourselves in the story of Israel?

Canticle 9 - *Ecce Deus* Isaiah 12:2-6

One of the unusual features of the Revised Common Lectionary is its occasional use of a canticle rather than a psalm in between the first two lessons. This canticle from the Prophet Isaiah builds on the themes of the first lesson. Like the passage from Zephaniah above, it comes at the conclusion of a series of judgments and woes, painting a picture of joy and restoration. Isaiah sings of healing waters for a thirsty people, giving us another, equally evocative, picture of the promised day we hear about in Zephaniah. Isaiah, too, emphasizes the abiding presence of God among God’s people, dwelling among them, “the Holy One of Israel” “in the midst of [them].”

- Where else in the Scriptures do we hear of life-giving or healing waters?
- What is significant for us about the words “save,” “Savior,” and “salvation” in this song?

Philippians 4:4-7

This passage from the conclusion of St. Paul’s letter to the Church in Philippi is, at the risk of being cliché, short but sweet. He exhorts those who hear him to rejoice, to be so gentle that it is obvious to everyone, to worry not, to be in prayer with God, supplicating, but, above all, giving thanks. Paul desires that the Philippians would let the peace of God, which is better than human intellection, wash over them, for it will stand watch over their hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. Why does Paul tell the Philippians to do all of this? The answer is simple: because “the Lord is near.”

- What does it look like to “rejoice in the Lord” in the midst of congregational (or even denominational) strife?
- How do the People of God experience peace and joy in this imperfect time before the Lord returns?

Luke 3:7-18

I am reminded that St. John the Baptist is not a “nice” man. He has no problem with calling those who are drawn to him a “brood of vipers” when he questions their level of sincerity. His message is also not a soft one. The eschatological ax, he says, is ready to chop down not only the barren trees but also those that do not bear good enough fruit, after which they will be thrown into the fire. Likewise, while the wheat will be gathered safely into the barns, the chaff will be burned with “unquenchable fire.” And, according to John, there is nothing special about being a child of Abraham, a child of the promise. Yet, at the end of this passage, St. Luke calls all of this “good news.” And it really is. After all, the One who will burn the chaff with fire will also baptize the penitent with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This One is none other than the Messiah, whom the people coming to John are awaiting so eagerly that they hope that the Baptist himself might fit the bill. Yes, the Messiah will bring a fire of destruction, but also a fire of purification and renewal. Furthermore, there is time, right now, to repent and bear good fruit. No, John is not a “nice” man. But he is good, and so is the One he proclaims.

- John is preparing the way for the Messiah; why does that include exhorting people to repentance?

Written by Donald J. Griffin

Growing up a cradle Episcopalian in the Dallas area, Donald Griffin first discerned a call to the priesthood when he was fourteen. Since then, Donald has sought to answer that call and follow the path he believes God has set for him. He graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in Religious Studies, minoring in Philosophy and History. It was there that he fell in love with the woman he will be marrying in a few months. Having entered the discernment process my senior year of college, Donald was granted postulancy shortly after graduation and entered Nashotah House for his seminary formation. He has worked as a counselor at diocesan camp, a chaplain at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas (while completing CPE), and a seminary intern at Trinity Episcopal Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Donald has become very interested in theology, the practice of pastoral ministry, and how the two intersect, particularly in the liturgy. He is looking forward to seeing where the Lord will lead him next.

Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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