

“A Good Word in a Rough Time”  
Zephaniah 3: 14-20  
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Good morning and welcome to the Bah Humbug worship service. How is this the Bah Humbug service, you might ask? The 9AM service this morning featured the children’s Christmas Pageant. So by coming to the 11AM service today, you are in a quiet protest of Christmas pageants. Ouch. I would ask, how can you all be so mean? Do you really dislike children that much? Of course I’m just joking, and it’s wonderful to see you all here today, even if you aren’t in the pageant spirit, or if you’re really confused by what I’m saying because you just wanted to get some more sleep today and came to the later service, not knowing that there even was a pageant earlier. But all of that’s ok, because if we think about it, Christmas pageants are a pretty bizarre thing. The story of Christmas features a teen pregnancy that seems to have come about by illegitimate means. There’s a confused groom who originally plans to quietly dismiss his teenage bride in order to avoid her stoning. There are complex lessons on hospitality, socio-economic class systems, and even references to mystical, astronomy driven, non-Judaic cultic traditions. And

behind the whole story is the unbelievably complex notion of divine incarnation, theological kenosis, and transcendence versus immanence. So with all of that in play, obviously the best way to communicate this story is to have the little kids act it out. Makes perfect sense. Now I'm sounding bah humbug and that's really not the case. Everyone did a great job at the pageant this morning, but since this is the grown up, adult service, we're going to get into some more grown up topics. We're going to take a look at one of the Minor Prophets, Zephaniah. Passages from this book only show up twice in the lectionary. One of those instances is this week, on the third Sunday of Advent. This book is not a cornerstone of the liturgical calendar, and it's not a book that shows up in many Bible studies. But it does, I believe, have something interesting to offer us today.

But first, who is this guy Zephaniah? Like I said, he's a minor prophet, which means his book is amongst a group of shorter prophecies in the Old Testament. Zephaniah was writing at the beginning of the reign of King Josiah of Judah. Josiah was a great reformer, and the book of Kings gives great praise to Josiah for his leadership in purifying the country of idols and

other pagans worship centers. But before Josiah, the kings of Judah and Israel had no regard for God and they led the people into idolatry. As leaders they acted very corruptly, exploiting the poor and disadvantaged. So Zephaniah is reacting to these leaders, who are corrupt and exploitive. The majority of Zephaniah is dark and full of judgment. The beginning of chapter 3 speaks of Jerusalem and says

“Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! <sup>2</sup>It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the LORD; it has not drawn near to its God. <sup>3</sup>The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. <sup>4</sup>Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law. <sup>5</sup>The LORD within it is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame. <sup>6</sup>I have cut off nations; their battlements are in ruins; I have laid waste their streets so that no one walks in them; their cities have been made desolate, without people, without inhabitants. <sup>7</sup>I said, “Surely the city will fear me, it

will accept correction; it will not lose sight of all that I have brought upon it.”

But they were the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt.”

This is frightening. The people of Judah have become corrupt and God is angry. God will not stand for this corruption. This is the tone of almost all of Zephaniah. But when we get to our passage for today, it's quite different, there's a message of hope. Feel free to read along with me in your pew Bible.

This is Zephaniah 3:14-20. Listen for the Word of God:

<sup>14</sup>Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. <sup>17</sup>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 <sup>18</sup>as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that

you will not bear reproach for it. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>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 Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I hope this passage has some resonance for you today. It is an Advent passage, and it's to be read in light of the coming Christ. But I think it speaks just as well to the current state of our country and world. Those of you here today might not be victims of corruption and oppression, but I do believe this message of hope can reach a wide audience. Let me elaborate. My wife and I just moved here about two months ago and one of the first things we did was join a gym. We're really happy with our gym, but in the men's locker room there's a TV that's always on, and whenever I'm there in the morning the TV is always set to CNBC and there are commentators giving the financial news.

Any rabid CNBC watchers out there? Now, I'm obviously not an economist or a finance expert. I've spent a large part of my life tucked away in the library pouring over ancient theological tomes. I've never cracked open an economics textbook. So the language of the financial commentators on CNBC is a foreign language to me. But in the instances that I hear it on the TV at the gym, I can't help but feel that these commentators are very similar to ancient prophets of doom! Unemployment rates continue to rise! House prices continue to fall! No one is allowed to get a mortgage! Consumers aren't spending like they should be! Retail sales are at all time lows! The sun is going to stop burning and the entire universe will be sucked into a black hole! I'm not a fearful person, but it's hard to watch that and not feel afraid. I am of course being a bit hyperbolic, and I'm not trying to make light of the current recession and the hardships that it's caused, but I do believe that the news sources have cultivated a need for a message of hope. To be fair, CNBC does often feature commentators who say the government is doing such and such programs that will fix such and such problem, but then there's always the person who counters that argument saying that new government policies will

only lengthen this recession and that soon post-World War I Germany, with the wheelbarrows full of money to buy a loaf of bread, will look like paradise compared to what we'll be dealing with. We need a genuine message of hope.

So what bit of hope can this ancient, minor prophet give to us in this time, where the news encourages us to be fearful? Verse 15 says “the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.” God is the king. Like I mentioned before, there is certainly a lot of talk about what the government is going to do to fix the world. Now, the Israelites were people very much enamored with their kings. The king was the head of the state and the health or un-health of the state was in the hands of the king. The reason Saul and then David were chosen to be the king of Israel was because the people demanded from God that a king be appointed to that they could be more like their neighbors, who had powerful monarchs. The Bible states again and again that the king, the person in power is responsible for the country's failings and shortcoming. The Israelites had immeasurable regard for their human leaders. I think that our culture is also often guilty of putting all responsibility for well-being in the hands of our elected leaders. The sad fact is that elected leaders often fail us

or create greater problems. What Zephaniah says very clearly is that God is truly the king. God is the ultimate ruler. That is a message of hope. God is ultimately in charge. So CNBC reports that the Fed is going to do such and such and congress is going to pass such and such relief act and I think, ok good, hopefully that will do some good. But the news that God, the ultimate creator of the universe who loves each and every one of us more than we can possibly imagine, is in our midst and is taking care of us, well, that's a message that I can get behind. That's a message that elicits a sigh of relief. That's the message that Zephaniah wants to tell us. God is King. Ultimate control does not rest in the hands of flawed human beings but in the hands of our benevolent creator. That's a message of hope.

What also really stands out in this passage is that image of God being present. God has shown up. That's why this is an Advent passage, chosen for the time of year that celebrates when God really did show up. But for me it's sometimes hard to get my head, or even my heart, around this very abstract notion that God is in our midst. I'm not seeing God standing here next to me right now, or when I'm pressed with making difficult decisions. So how can

we get our hearts around this idea? I want to propose a little exercise that we can do together. Let's find a real feeling that we've had that parallels God being in our midst and let's hold onto that. Let me explain. Many times I've heard in my life of discipleship that I should be Christ like, that is, act, behave, and treat others like Christ did. That's an awesome thing to strive for, but for me that's always been difficult because knowing what Christ would do in a certain situation is often very tricky. You see, we have no specific example of how Christ dealt with a fender bender on the highway, or how Christ dealt with losing a job, or getting in a big fight with a family member. Since we don't have biblical examples of how Christ dealt with those situations, and since our modern world is significantly different than the world of Jesus, I like to find someone who is a bit more contemporary who exemplifies Christ-likeness and imitate them. For me, I usually choose Mr. Rogers and I often ask myself how would Mr. Rogers act in a situation like this. Mr. Rogers was of course a Presbyterian minister and a devout Christian, and to me he really displayed a Christ-like attitude. So if I'm tasked with being more like Christ, being like Mr. Rogers is a good place to start. Of course, Mr. Rogers was not

Jesus, and this practice can only go so far, but like I said, it's a good place to start. All that's to say, when we try to get our heads around this idea of God being near, God coming into town and taking over, God bringing relief to our stress, I believe we can apply the same principal. Let's find a time where someone has come into our lives in one way or another and we've just breathed a sigh of relief.

Let me give a couple of examples to continue to try and illustrate this.

When I was in high school I was on the swim team, and I did decently well, but not amazingly, and I would get outrageously nervous before a swim meet. I would get so nervous that I would actually hope for a car accident on the way to the meet so that I could break my leg and then not have to swim. But there was a guy on the team named RD who was miles beyond me in his swimming ability. He won multiple state titles and I would always hope that RD would be placed on my relay team, because if RD was on the relay team we were guaranteed to win the relay. He was just that good. So when the coach would announce the lineup and he would say that RD and I were on the same relay team, my nervousness would melt away and I'd feel relaxed,

knowing that even if I didn't perform my best, RD was there to ensure the win. That was a feeling of peace, a feeling where disaster was removed.

Another example. My father is an incredible sailor. As a youth he won all kinds of awards for sailing because he has this innate sense about the wind. I know there's wind if I see a flag moving. My dad however always knows which way the wind is blowing, how strong it is, where it's headed, whether it's shifty or even. He can read the wind like most people would read a book. It's incredible and it has made him a great sailor. A few years ago we went on a week-long sailing trip on a big boat and at one point he gave me the helm and told me he was going to go take a nap down below. I was a bit frightened but I thought it would be a good experience serving as skipper for a few hours. After a little bit of smooth sailing the winds started to change, my control over the boat waned and I started to get scared. Right as I was about to panic my dad appeared from down below, took the helm and gracefully got us back on track. It was a brief moment, but again it was a moment where I took great comfort in knowing that the right authority was present and that all would be well. So to really grasp this feeling of knowing that God is present, that God

has come to town and that God is in charge, I try to recapture the feeling that I had when RD was on my swimming relay team and the feeling from when my dad took the helm. If I can reclaim those feelings, I can begin to understand the feeling of knowing that God is in our midst and that God has victory planned for us.

So, try this out. When was a time that you breathed a sigh of relief because the right person showed up and took control? How did you feel at that moment? Grab that feeling and apply it to God being in our midst. With God in our midst, what stressors and anxieties are taken away? Zephaniah describes God as a warrior who gives you victory. I can imagine that in a society riddled with war, as was Zephaniah's, hearing that God was a warrior that would ensure victory brought up a very visceral but comforting image for people. So what is your image and how can it be applied to your situation right now.

God is in our midst. That's a hopeful message. The Christian church has set aside Advent to really dwell on God being present here. There might be doomsday prophets all around us and you might even be dealing with your

own doomsday at the moment. But I would encourage everyone to really grab hold of an image of God in our midst. God is present. In Jesus, God has come to reside with us. With God here we can fear disaster no more. Amen.