



THE NEW SHOFAR

Being baptized requires of us a transformed way of living

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

Advent 3

Israel is not to adjust itself to fit in with what “the nations” demand

The name of the Prophet Zephaniah means *Yahweh protects* and his name very much reflects his message. In the face of the Assyrian threats to the peace and the future security of the nation, the faithful Jews need to accept that God is fighting for them. They need to turn to God and not rely on mere human force of arms. His message is about the coming *Day of the Lord*, a day that will be a day of *judgment* but also a day of *salvation*. The nation’s sins, he says, come from a desire to be *like the other nations*. They pollute the will of God with the latest fad, fashion, philosophy and political movement that comes their way. They take on these things and abandon the truth because they fear being different.

The Lord your God is in your midst as a warrior giving you victory

Zephaniah says there is no way to avoid the guilt of God’s people. They have turned from the covenant ways and lived their own lives for far too long. They think God has not noticed their sins. But judgment is even now falling upon them (in the Assyrian armies says the prophet). However, there is an even greater judgment to come – at the End when all creation is called to a final judgment before the throne of God. Those realities should have been enough to bring the people back to a life of faithfulness.

But the message of Zephaniah is not about scaring the people into action. He reminds them of the way God judges us in ways we do not deserve. God is a God of mercy and when *that Day of the Lord* comes, it will be this divine mercy that characterizes the way we are to be judged. It is thanksgiving and joy that brings us to repent, to take up a renewed and transformed way of living and not just fear of a strict accounting for our words and deeds. Because God has loved us so much we are called to love in return.

Notice who the key actor is in this text – it is God who is doing all of the healing. And, what seems to be most shocking of all is the way the rightful sentence of death has been commuted. The world rejoices that God has freed humankind to live another day in another way. We are told how it will be in God that all men and women, all groups, nations and peoples will have a way to live as one people under one God. That way was not to be experienced in the time of Zephaniah but would be inaugurated with the coming of God’s Son. All that was needed to experience the peace and joy of that coming New Era was for people to *repent*. Let God be their protection and live under the God who loves them.

You children of snakes!

John certainly does not mince his words here. The people coming down to him for baptism are anything but repentant! They are accused of saying one thing but living in a very different manner. Their words of sorrow and their desire to make amends are not evident in the way they live when they return to their villages and homes.

John had already called upon the people to *prepare a way for the Lord* but what he observes is how they have gone back to their former ways. The visitation of God is upon them and the appropriate response must be the abandonment of their old ways of *extortion, blackmail, the focus on the accumulation of wealth, bleeding others dry in order to enhance their own position,*

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and so on. The life of a truly repentant person would stand out by virtue of the way they love God and the manner in which they put others before themselves. Self-centred living is not the way to prepare a people to be ready for the coming of the Lord.

We have Abraham for our father = we go to Church every Sunday!

The response of these people to John revolves around their ancestry. They are God's Chosen People, especially chosen out of all of the nations of the earth. God would not abandon them to eternal darkness! Surely? What the Baptist says in reply is religion shattering. If God wants more descendants of Abraham, they can be raised up out of stones. No, what God wants is much more than claims to a spiritual heritage. What God demands, expects, looks for, is a way of living that radiates the divine presence within a person and enlivening a faith community.

The equivalent today would be having Jesus remind us how he does not want more Christians going to Church on Sunday (though that would indeed be fantastic). What Jesus wants is more men and women of faith giving witness to the Gospel; living the reality of a Jesus who died for their sins, who rose from the grave, ascended to heaven, is with them in the world today; a Christ who will return again at the End of time as judge of the living and the dead. If the people of our world/society cannot experience the Kingdom of God in our words and in our deeds, then we too are little more than *the children of snakes*.

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, his arm rules for him; his reward is with him,

This line is from last week's reading from Isaiah, but it is important because it highlights the great message of Isaiah chapter 40. It is a song about the saving love of God. Israel's God is filled with divine wisdom. A God who understands the way Israel's faithfulness ebbs and wanes. People struggle with sin and the call to righteous living. They sin. They fall. They become lazy, forgetful, busy, distracted and tempted by substitute "gods". They come under divine judgement but that is never the end. Salvation is an enduring characteristic of God. While the people move backwards and forwards from cold to warm to hot and then back to cold again in their love and faithfulness, God remains constant in love and in mercy.

For John, that mercy and salvation will be realized in the person of Jesus who was born in a manger in Bethlehem. This is the Messiah Luke will present to us as the One sent by God to inaugurate a new time in human history, the time of the Reign of God. They should celebrate the coming of the Messiah (at Christmas) for in receiving the Messiah they are making themselves ready for his final return at the End as the divine Judge of all.

But what must we do to "prepare"?

The need to be *doing* something is a significant part of Luke's theology. *Doing* discipleship is the only way to encounter the power of God's reign in life. *Doing* discipleship means an actual re-appraisal of our spiritual lives, our priorities and the way we engage with those in the wider world. Discipleship does not allow for a *more of the same* kind of thinking and acting. Changes need to be added to life - our daily engagement with the Scriptures; prayer times (add praying at meals, prayer at the close of the day, perhaps an extra worship time during the week) and our charitable engagement with others who are in need of some kind. It also means there needs to be a transformation in the way we actually live (an intentional transformation here) - In the words of Paul to the Corinthians... *be patient; be kind; avoid envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, irritability, resentfulness and insisting on my own way...* Discipleship is difficult. It is impossible without grace and we are now entering into the time of divine grace.

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