

“Joy Restored”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

3rd Wednesday in Advent

December 9, 2009

Sometimes in a trying to be fair we create opportunities for people to feel rejected and not valued. Let me give you an example.

When in school growing up, the teacher would provide a time for the class to play a game. Two teams were created and in trying to be fair, the teacher would assign two students to be captains. These two students then, with alternating picks, choose their team. As you might imagine someone was chosen first and someone will be chosen last. During my years in school the same kids were chosen first and the same were chosen last. Those chosen last felt not wanted, having no value to the other kids, and rejected. I always hated that way of choosing teams.

Try to imagine how you would feel about yourself, if after many years in school, a place that affects and shapes self worth through acceptance by your peers, that you are chosen last time and again, year after year. I can think of a lot of terrible experiences to have to go through in life but to experience rejection, to not be wanted has to be one of the most difficult experiences of them all. It is for me.

Advent is a time for joy, not primarily because we are anticipating the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, but because God is already in our midst. That is what the prophet Zephaniah claims. He is speaking to a people who have been burdened with war and destruction and displacement. Their lives have been assaulted and their hopes have been dashed.

They have been people who have forsaken God for the gods of the land. They have become people whose leaders are corrupt, they have become unjust in their business dealings, and they as a people have become complacent, taking for granted all the blessings given to them in this land by God. Like choosing sides for a team, they have found it easier to choose those who will help them and reject those who will not.

Unfortunately, our world is not terribly different from theirs. It too is burdened with war and destruction and displacement; lives have been assaulted and hopes have been dashed. We are probably as skeptical about peace and restoration as were the ancient Israelites—perhaps even more. However, this skepticism need not prevent us from trusting that God will encircle us with love and will grant us the peace we so desperately seek.

Zephaniah, although only three chapters long, addresses Israel first in judgment for her lack of faith and trust in God, and then out of the judgment, the rejection she felt, came a new word of restoration, acceptance, and new life with God. The prophet assures them that with God in their midst, they can indeed move forward into a new life.

Perhaps one of the most powerful images, however, is the one that 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.” □ This joy is not subdued nor is it quiet or dignified.

The Hebrew words used here are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe great jubilation. The Lord rejoices over his beloved, over Judah and Jerusalem, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isaiah 62:5). As David danced in front of the Ark of the Covenant, in exultation, so God rejoices over God's people (2 Samuel 6). As the morning stars sang at the creation of the world, so God sings with elation over God's beloved (Job 38:7). □ □

We are accustomed to images of God as judge. We are accustomed to 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? Yet here, in our text, God is caught up in a joy that overflows into song, a joy that springs from love renewed, a relationship restored. □ □

This image of God bears no resemblance to Bette Midler's song "From a distance." You may recall the chorus was: "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us...from a distance." □

God is moved, is deeply affected, by human attitudes and actions. God does not watch from a distance, but enters into the life of the world. God enters even into human flesh, in the mystery and wonder of the incarnation.

Tonight 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. As God is invested in the life of the people of Israel, so too, God is invested in each of our lives. God seeks to restore us, to claim us, and to choose us!

Tonight we remember that God loves us. Tonight we remember that God is in our midst and we need not fear. Tonight, even in a world in which there is war, hardship, failure and deceit, God is here. Tonight we remember God sings, God shouts and God rejoices. Because God loves us, because God restores us in relationship, because God promises to never leave us and remains with us in the midst of our lives, there is joy!

AMEN