

Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

First Reading

Zephaniah 3:14–20

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter of Jerusalem!  
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;  
he has cleared away your enemies.  
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall never again fear evil.  
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
“Fear not, O Zion;  
let not your hands grow weak.  
The LORD your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.  
I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,  
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.  
Behold, at that time I will deal  
with all your oppressors.  
And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.  
At that time I will bring you in,  
at the time when I gather you together;  
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. (ESV)

Second Reading

Philippians 4:4–7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Luke 3:7–18

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

I have to say that these verses from Zephaniah are among my favorites from the “lesser prophets” in the Bible. At the same time, it would be inappropriate of me to extoll the imagery of this passage from Zephaniah without showing you some of his earlier verses, verses we don’t hear in the lectionary.

### Zephaniah 1:14–18

The great day of the LORD is near,  
near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;  
the mighty man cries aloud there.  
A day of wrath is that day,  
a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of ruin and devastation,  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness,  
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities  
and against the lofty battlements.  
I will bring distress on mankind,  
so that they shall walk like the blind,  
because they have sinned against the LORD;  
their blood shall be poured out like dust,  
and their flesh like dung.  
Neither their silver nor their gold  
shall be able to deliver them  
on the day of the wrath of the LORD.  
In the fire of his jealousy,  
all the earth shall be consumed;  
for a full and sudden end  
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. (ESV)

Wow. And yes, it does say *ALL* of the inhabitants of the earth there. Not just the unfaithful of Judah, to whom he prophesies.

Zephaniah was, according to most scholars, closely related to the royal court. The recitation of his lineage in the opening chapter is unusual among the prophetic books. He prophesied in the early part of the reign of Josiah, and probably knew Jeremiah (who would have been younger than Zephaniah). His dominant theme, which he seems to have learned from Amos and Isaiah, was “The Day of the Lord,” at which time unfaithful Judah would be horribly punished for her sins.

And yet he closes with these incredible words of hope and joy.

What am I to make of all that?

In past Divergences I have talked a lot about how I think time works in the realm of prophecy. Here I want to harken back to what I've said before about the dual layers of revelation in the Bible. First it reveals God and the heart of our Creator for us. (Always for, not against us.) Second, it reveals us to ourselves, both in our unfaithfulness at times and in our distortion of God when we forget that God is always for us.

Let me see if I can make sense of that with regard to Zephaniah.

As a prophet, Zephaniah has a vision of the goodness and the holiness of God, but he has also a deep understanding of the corruption of the hearts of many of those around him, especially among the powerful circles in which he moved. He "sees" these things. He knows them on a deep level.

And anyone who is close to the heart of God also knows the terrible anger that burns in Him against that which destroys God's children. Fierce love is inescapably linked to fierce anger.

That's a scary thing to say. One might use it to justify spousal abuse, for instance. But that is a perversion of love. It is love turned inward, not outward, treating the beloved as a possession, not someone worthy of love. The fierce anger only really protects the heart of the one who's angry, and that's not love.

No, the kind of fierce love/anger I'm talking about is like that of the momma bear when we venture too near her cubs. No matter how foolish the cubs might have been in approaching me, accepting food from me, her anger is against me, the threat. And of course, even this analogy fails with regard to God, because to God, the mama bear, I'm not the threat either, just another misguided cub.

Zephaniah, because he has not yet seen the heart of the Father revealed in Jesus, cannot yet make that separation. He still sees God's jealous wrath as being directed *at* God's children. Zephaniah rightly perceives the disastrous course on which Judah has set itself, and lacking insight, he wrongly attributes the pain and destruction that is to come to the wrath of God. This is the way humans distort God when they do not really know God's heart as revealed in Jesus.

And yet, somehow he manages to close with the heart of the Father that restores. (Well, okay, he didn't close... these were collected after the time of Zephaniah. But a later redactor did.) This is the last word. This is the image, after all the devastation, that stands. Rather like the New Jerusalem, descending from heaven as a bride adorned for her bridegroom follows on all the scary and painful stuff in the first chapters of Revelation. In the words of the title of Rob Bell's book. "Love Wins." (Didn't Carrie Underwood record a song by that title, too?)

Second reading

Whew.. Okay. Now for something lighter. Sort of.

First, I'd like to add a few verses to this week's reading. Just a few that come right after it. They do kind of complete the thought.

This week's reading goes:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Then Paul says:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (ESV)

I'm struck in this week's reading and in the bit I added that Paul speaks so powerfully about peace, the peace of God and the God of peace.

As I mentioned in last week's Divergence, Paul wrote this from prison in Ephesus, where he likely expected to die. And yet he speaks of rejoicing, and of peace. Peace that passes understanding. When I read that in its prison context, I can just see Paul's guards scratching their heads, trying to make sense of the absolutely palpable peace that pervades his cell and the area around it. His circumstances don't support it, and yet he has peace they cannot understand. I think on that and I smile.

In those few verses Paul tells us what it is that he does to support that peace, to remain constantly aware of the truth that the God of Peace is with him. And he suggests that his readers (and we) imitate him. I will, I'm sure, get more into the power of imitation, both to destroy and to build up, but that's for another time. The point here is that Paul offers his example as a means to the peace that he knows, even on "death row."

Even more than when I first wrote most of this three years ago, this peace is more deeply needed than it has been in a long, long time. Those of us who can find it must carry it for those whose lives are so threatened that they cannot. This is not a matter of going into hard places and uttering platitudes. Telling others to "be at peace" is condescending. But if we carry that peace as powerfully as I know we can, they will discover it in us, on their own.

I have had difficulty finding and carrying that peace in recent weeks, but Paul in Philippians reawakens me to that call. I hope he has done the same for some of you.

### Gospel Text

John the Baptist is a tricky character for the evangelists as they tell the story of Jesus. We have narrowed our vision of him to the role of the forerunner, which he certainly was, but there was so much more to him. He had his own following long before Jesus came on the scene. Many scholars believe (and I think it credible) that there was some early friction between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus.

Each of the evangelists deals with this awkwardness in their own way. Luke does this by honoring John, by including more of his teachings than any of the other evangelists. He tells us of John's conception and his reaction in the womb to Mary's presence when she was pregnant with Jesus. But I think he also is clearer about how John misunderstood Jesus than any of the others. Only in Luke do we read about John sending his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one, or are we to look for another." John, in Herod's prison, isn't seeing from Jesus what he thought he'd see. Perhaps, given Luke's earlier wilderness description of John's life and the parallels to Qumran, John also expected a kind of "withdrawal" from Jesus and His followers.

And then, after Jesus sends John's disciples back to him, we get this amazing and somewhat curious tribute to John from the lips of Jesus.

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?"

Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

*“Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he (John).”*

John, like Zephaniah and all the prophets before him, got a lot right about God and the Messiah, but he didn't get it all right. Luke goes to great lengths to recount those things about John that show what a great prophet he was, but he also seems to be clearer than anyone else that John didn't get it all right. That anyone who is “in the kingdom of God” which I would read to mean anyone who knows God as revealed in Jesus, that one has knowledge that dwarfs anything John or any prophet before him ever knew.