

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

^{3:14} Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ 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 ¹⁸ as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.

Commentary

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.). He denounced the arrogant leaders of Judah, who accommodated themselves and their people to foreign customs rather than maintaining the purity and integrity of YHWH worship and covenant righteousness. His main targets were those who had adopted idolatrous forms of worship, who had sought wealth and power through exploitation, violence and fraud, and who arrogantly carried on their business, thinking YHWH did not care about human affairs. Zephaniah lamented over the corruption of Jerusalem, the predatory activity of their leaders and the perversion of the priests. He reminded them that YHWH was offended by injustice and oppression. The prophecy closes with the good news of God's deliverance. The meek would inherit the land, while those who sought to acquire the land through scheming means would be cut off. This passage is chosen for use during Advent because Christians can interpret it as referring to a new age of joy and liberation to be inaugurated with the coming of Christ as Messiah.

Reflection

What does this passage say about the situation in our country today, with the growing gap between rich and poor, corporate greed and fraud, unemployment homelessness and hunger? In what ways can we do our part to promote God's justice in our society?

Philippians 4:4-7

^{4:4} Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Commentary

"Joy in the Lord" is an important motif running through Philippians. The third Sunday of Advent reminds us of the joy that awaits the believer in Christ's appearance. Even in prison, Paul is full of this joy—a joy that does not depend on external circumstances but on the friendship of God and fellow believers. Rejoicing in the Lord is precisely what Paul does when he abandons attempts to build himself up on worldly credentials and leaves behind all the self-centered, competitive ways of life. His attention turns to seeking life as God's gift in Christ. By focusing on the person of Christ, he becomes attuned to the character and will of God. Paul encourages all his friends in Philippi to do the same. Centering on this joy provides a resource of unity and peace for the community of faith. This joy enables "gentle forbearance" toward all people, and through it one is freed to respond with patience rather than anger or harshness. Thanksgiving for God's past help also offers this peace, witnessing to our hearts how magnificently God has cared for us. "The Lord is near" refers to God in terms of time. Christ stands ready to break into history and usher in God's reign. This is a source of confidence to all the harassed Christians in Philippi. As the be-all and end-all, God is the source of everlasting joy, stability, and peace.

Reflection

How do you experience the nearness of God? What affect does it have on you? How can this reality help us put our circumstances in perspective, so we can enjoy the same benefits?

Luke 3:7-18

^{3:7} John said 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? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these

stones to raise up children to Abraham.⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Commentary

Last week's Gospel reading introduced John the Baptist as the end-time messenger who called people to prepare to encounter God. Repentance and a return to God's ways was a recommended strategy for surviving "the wrath to come." Here we find John's prescriptions for preparation for the "one who is coming." John greeted the crowds unflatteringly and warned them that no ritual purification would suffice to guarantee safety on the day of Judgment. Rather, the fruits of a repentant heart must be clearly visible. In this, John agrees with other voices of his time. John attacked any notion that physical descent from Abraham would give one a claim on God's favor (an attack that would become characteristic of early Christian ideology). John's message threatened the overly confident with being cut off from the lineage they so treasured. Something else was needed to avoid the judgment. The metaphor of the clearing out of unfruitful trees in 3:9 emphasizes the importance of finding fruit pleasing to God in our lives. This answer is in keeping with Luke's special emphasis on sharing possessions and using one's goods to benefit the needy. It is astounding for the American mind to see what John considered to be "surplus" and therefore available for sharing with the needy. The tangible expressions of love for neighbor, however are essential to John (and Luke) for eschatological survival. John gives the command to those in every profession to act honorably—not using their jobs as opportunities to plunder their neighbors. Aware of God's Spirit behind John's call to repent, the people wondered about his role in God's plan: Was he the Messiah? John said no, he was only the forerunner of the Coming One.

Reflection

How can we support one another in resisting the pressures of a greedy, affluent, wasteful society and in giving generously to meet human need? If we find this particularly challenging, what is the source of that struggle?

Responsive Psalter

Isaiah 12:2-6

^{12:2} Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴ And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.