

Advent 3 (Joy) Year C: 15 /16 December 2018

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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“There can be no escape from God’s judgement, yet in turning to the needs of the least among us, we live in accord with God’s desire for righteousness and justice.”

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Philippians 4: 4-7

Luke 3: 7-18

Canticle 9

“Do not fear, O Zion; the Lord is in your midst!

*“He's making a list and checking it twice
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is comin' to town
He sees you when you're sleepin'
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake”*

Now that I have ear-wormed you with this familiar contemporary Christmas song, imagine, if you will, switching out Santa Claus as the subject and using God instead: it is God who’s making a list and checking it twice, who’s going to find out who’s naughty and nice, who sees us when we’re sleeping and awake and knows who has been good or bad, for God is coming to town! I wager that such a song wouldn’t gain much air-time on any radio station or be streamed on the internet. However, it does get to the heart of the Advent message of preparation in anticipation of God’s indwell among us and with us.

It seems odd that a child’s song can act prophetically in calling us to a deeper awareness that God’s judgment towards an unworthy people is being set aside. That the plight of the dispossessed, the lowly and meek shall be vindicated and justice restored. I am sure the song writer never intended for their words to be used in such a manner nor did they possibly think of themselves as prophetic, yet their words still capture the essence of the prophet’s message.

Prophets shed light on what most of us don't want to see, hear, or believe. We don't want to have our lives scrutinized. We don't want to be discomforted or inconvenienced. Yet the shadow of ignorance is long when the Light of Truth (the Gospel) shines upon society, especially Western society which has become acculturated to consumer values rather than what God values. Our ethics and morals are skewed towards the privileged at the expense of the poor and meek, the lowly and humble. For instance, in Charles Dickens' story of the Christmas Carol, there is more generosity in the spirit of a crippled little boy than a wealthy man of means. There is more charity and goodness in this small child's heart than there is in many a celebrated philanthropic patron. The Good News of Christ Jesus is very different for these seemingly opposite social communities. For the dispossessed that message is one of liberation. For the privileged, it is one of relinquishment.

The prophet Zephaniah has been shown God's future, God's intention for the people. In the first part of Zephaniah's discourse, he pronounces judgement on the people for not abiding according to their covenant with God. Corruption and injustice prevail in the land. Leaders abuse their power at the expense of the weak. In the midst of sinfulness - darkness - God's promise offers hope to the weary and downtrodden. We may deserve punishment for our indiscretion and poor judgment in how we treat those in need, abuse those who struggle for survival, for how we refuse to honor one another with dignity, but God is gracious and good. God's intention is one of restorative justice, of lifting up the downtrodden and dispossessed, of giving respect to the lowly and dignity to the humble.

It may be difficult for many to hear that God is gracious and good when all around us is despair and want, suffering and disappointment. There is so much to lament. How can one understand God as good when they have been cast out of the family because of their gender identity? How can God be good when the church disenfranchises individuals for their orientation? Is God good when our political establishment enforces draconian practices upon women and children escaping persecution? How can God care for the prisoner when the scale of justice weighs in favor of certain ethnic groups at the expense of others? When women are victimized at the hands of men who refuse to be held accountable for their behavior towards them, how can God be understood as good? Indeed, there is much to lament, but there is also hope.

Institutions, religious and secular, are not God though the people who lead and establish norms within these organizations profess faith in God. Many atrocities are done in the name of God, when they are in fact abominations of God's message. That is the abuse of power Zephaniah calls out, the brood of vipers John the Baptist singles out. Darkness is upon the land, both of yore and today. Yet hope remains. It remains when small deeds lift the lowly, when kind words encourage the downtrodden, when charitable offerings meet the needs of the meek and dispossessed. It is no coincidence that a small insignificant child in a Dickens' story leads the way. It is also no coincidence that a child ushers in God's justice and mercy. Nor is it coincidental that a child's Christmas song speaks prophetically. We are frail and imperfect individuals trying to live into our covenant relationship with God. And John the Baptist knows that. He knows that if we are genuine in our repentance, in our asking "what can we do?" that hope is alive and God's promise remains.

John is very clear in his response to those who inquire and it isn't an easy prescription. Whatever you have, you must share it with those who have little or none. It isn't an unexpected reply nor is it unfamiliar. Throughout Torah and the prophetic writings one hears the call to repentance and righteousness; to care for the marginalized and outcast.

"Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight.
Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good.
Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow." (Isaiah 1.16-17)

". . . [God] will listen to the prayer of
the one who is wronged.
[God] will not ignore the supplication
of the orphan
or the widow when she pours
out her complaint." (Ecclesiasticus 35.16b-17)

"Guard the rights of the widow, secure justice for the ward, give to the needy, defend the orphan, clothe the naked, care for the injured and the weak, do not ridicule the lame, protect the maimed . . ." (2 Esdras 2.20-21)

“Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Execute true justice; deal loyally and compassionately with one another. Do not defraud the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; and do not plot evil against one another.” (Zechariah 7.9-10)

There can be no escape from God’s judgement, yet in turning to the needs of the least among us, we live in accord with God’s desire for righteousness and justice. Thus, those who are privileged hear the call to relinquishment. And not a simple giving from one’s surplus, but half of whatever abundance those with means have. This goes well beyond the idea of tithing, of giving a percentage to temple or church. This is radical hospitality expressed in measure that exposes the systemic injustice of most economic policies. Biblical righteousness such that John is speaking of is one that calls for a transformed life, one re-orientated towards God. After all, the very one we await will testify that “just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me” (MT 25.40). The hungry are fed, the thirsty are given water, the naked clothed, the sick cared for, the prisoner visited. The least among us, the marginalized, the outcast, the stranger as well as the orphan and widows, and the list goes on – the disenfranchised, marginalized, those reviled due to their essential identity or orientation, their ethnicity or gender – these are the ones Jesus speaks for and in doing so encapsulates the fullness of what his cousin is speaking of. The relinquishment that John the Baptist speaks to – and we’re not just talking about material goods, but our attitudes and prejudices as well – requires a repentant heart and a transformed life.

What we must do is change our behavior to one that aligns with God’s intention. We must change not only our hearts but also our minds to align our value system along with what God values and that isn’t measured in our accumulating of material goods, especially when it occurs through corruption and exploitation. The generosity of spirit that Tiny Tim embodies is one that needs to infuse our lives such that kindness and goodness are not just virtues we speak of but once a year. God knows who has been naughty and nice, God is indeed checking that list and sees when we’ve been bad or good. Christ is coming to dwell with us, to dwell within us. Now is the time for each of us to take a spiritual inventory, time to make way for Immanuel – God with us!