

Strong Hands

Scripture Lessons: Luke 3:7-18, Zephaniah 3:14-20

Advent is a time of prophecy. We read the prophets of the Old Testament, and they predict that a Savior will come. We hear about sending a messenger, and rough places becoming plains, and a baby born to be Messiah. So we jump to the promise of Jesus, as if he was the only reason for the prophecies. We miss the fullness of the prophet's message when we only think they were looking forward to Jesus.

We miss a lot of the prophet's message because we think they were only speaking about the future. Prophets were more than predictors. They were not fortune-tellers. The word means "One who speaks for the Lord God." We need to look deeper at their message, in part because Jesus formed his faith, learned his mission, discovered he was Messiah by reading these prophets. They looked at the present tense through the eyes of faithfulness and the desires of God for the people. They saw good and bad things happening, and they spoke for God about the future when lots of bad things were happening.

Their message was to the whole nation and each one of the people of the covenant. We can never separate looking at the culture from what each of us do in faithfulness each day in our own lives. We need to listen to what God's prophets say about a nation, and what God's prophets say about our part in faithfulness to God.

What Zephaniah saw happening in his time is a lot like the happenings of our times.

He was the great-grandson of a great King of Judah, Hezekiah the faithful. But fifty years after him, Judah had several kings who ranged from mediocre to bad. Manasseh was the worst. His rule was marked by abuse of powers, economic injustice and moral decay. Some did prospered, and some has suffered. Well, a few prospered and most suffered. When Josiah took the throne of Judah, great hopes for reform returned, and Zephaniah told the people there is much to do if the nation was to be saved from their sins. Judah's demise would come, not from the attack of her foreign enemies, but by her own internal, cultural infections.

Zephaniah says Jehovah God has brought a lamp into the dark heart of Judah, and put a divine light on the shameless sins they try to hide from God and from themselves. Judah is sick with sin. Judah has spiritual heart disease.

Jerusalem has not listened and has not trusted the Lord. Officials have roared but done little, judges have turned to wolves, priests have profaned. People were more eager to wallow in corruption than to hear the Lord's voice.

There is a judgment coming in what all the prophets called "The Great Day of the Lord": It is doom and gloom, fire and blood, destruction and defeat. Judah must repent. Anyone knows that if it's not treated, heart disease is fatal.

Take about 30 minutes to read the short book that summarizes Zephaniah's message to God's people. You will hear his nation and ours, and you will read why our culture needs a Savior.

Let's be honest. Advent or any other time, we don't like to hear doom and gloom or fire and judgment preaching in church. We Presbyterians like the HOPE, PEACE, and LOVE candles, and the positive message. We would rather avoid what they show us by their light: Love shines on a people prone to hate, Peace illuminates our culture bent toward violence and war, Hope exposes a culture full of cynicism.

We avoid the prophet's messages negative talk. I can't understand why? We really seem to love bad news and judgment talk. Just look at what happened to a famous athlete in the last week. We live in a society that uses bad news to make money; "going negative" wins elections, personal attacks and name-calling that substitute for political analysis. We have news networks that now brag that they are biased, that they admit they are shaping reporting by what they want to see. We listen to "what's wrong" radio and "bad news" TV shows and we read web blogs that feed our fear. We may not like it, but we sure go along with it. And we seldom change the channel.

Why not read the prophets and get their take on what's right and wrong with a culture from a faith perspective? Yes, their judgment comes too close, but they also speak with great hope and the promises of God.

Were you listening to Zephaniah? I mean when the text for the day was read. He is honest about evil around him, ... and still he has HOPE for God's peace in the saving work of love. Did you hear Zephaniah's vision in God's light? "Sing aloud! Rejoice! The Lord has taken away judgment. Fear disaster no more."

"Do not let your hands grow weak. Jehovah will renew your love."

It's Advent! The message is prepare more than wait. And the message is turn toward God more than turn away from the problems we have made for ourselves. The message is to take the light to the darkness. The message is to work with strong hands. The message is that God renews our love.

We have every reason for HOPE: God never leaves us in any mess, even the ones we make for ourselves in our culture - or in our personal lives: in what we have done, and what we have left undone. We can focus on the ways that God is working, and we can work to make a difference with God in the world. Hope never surrenders to defeat or despair.

We have every reason for PEACE: We can be witnesses for trust in God to people who live in a Chicken Little, the Sky is Falling world. We can use the light of peace to bring some clear and calm to the storm and chaos of culture. We can bring God's peace whenever we hear a single troubled spirit or we hear talk that is rooted in fear.

We have every reason for LOVE, and we have a living definition of love we can show to a society that does not have any idea what the word means. We use the word "love" so much in so many vague ways that we have taken the meaning out of the world.

We have loved so many things that we have forgotten you can't love THINGS. I know we are in Brenham, but you can't love ice cream. I know we are all excited about championships, but you can't love football. You can't love WHATEver. We can't love a "what."

And you can't love a WHOever, either. Love is never broadcast or ambiguous. Love is always pointed toward someone or some group, or some family, or someone. We can only love someone.

So, the next question is more important. How do we love someone? How do we make sure what we do is loving? We know how to do these things better than we think.

Loving someone means we DO something FOR them. You can't tell someone you love them by doing nothing. You can't love someone by saying you do and then doing what you want. In that feel-good movie, "Jerry McGuire," a football agent is really a self-absorbed narcissist. The movie comes to focus in a scene that is supposed to be revelation and transformation. McGuire bursts into his girlfriend's house, and in front of her gathered girlfriends confesses, "I love you. ... You complete me."

We don't love someone for what they do for us. It's not love when we think that someone else should do what is best for us, or even what we think is best. Love relationships of all kinds are like marriage. We "take all the past that has shaped the other person, we share the other's dreams for tomorrow, and we embrace the family of our love as our own." Love puts their need over our want.

You know I'm a Texas, and my father would sometimes explain relationship truths in Texas images - sometimes in pictures my mother did not really approve. Dad said raising children was a lot like raising cattle. Success was determined by the size of the pasture, not the strength of the fence. Children need enough room to run and play and find their own way. They need to be able to explore and learn what they like and what they can do well. Sure, the fence is barbed wire, but children should not have to test the barbs. If the pasture is too big, children loose their sense of safety. But if the pasture is too small and children feel all boxed in, then they will test the fence and find out it's just a bluff.

Loving your children means they are not there to complete you. Loving them means their needs are more important than your wants. Loving your children means that giving them space to find their own dreams is more important than trying to get them to fulfill your dreams. When we tighten down on them all the time, and try to force them into our small image of who they ought to be, all we do is make them want to jump the fence. The principles of the pasture really apply to all our relationships. We love when we DO something that is FOR others. And we tell them we love them. We tell them God loves them.

We have a living lesson in love that is DOING for others. Jesus is the best example who has ever lived to show us how to love and who to love. All he asks is that we love other people the way he loves us. And he promises that DOING HIS love will be our salvation - and their salvation, too.

Zephaniah: “Do not let your hands grow weak. Jehovah will renew your love.”

Love is STRONG HANDS. Love is seeing work that God wants done among the lowly and humble. Love is putting the strength of our faith in the places where faithfulness can make a difference.

Love is STRONG HANDS taking hold of weak hands!

God’s love in Advent is strong hands opening gifts people who can’t tear the wrapping paper - the weak and lowly, like the residents at the State School just down the road.

God’s love in Advent is strong hands using hammers and paint brushes to build a Habitat Houses for the homeless, or maybe building gingerbread houses to build Habitat Houses.

God’s love in Advent is strong hands sharing a steak dinner with people who have troubled souls or weak hands at a Faith Mission.

God’s love in Advent is strong hands singing carols to church members who don’t get to hear carols in a sanctuary.

God’s love in Advent is strong hands reaching out to neighbors on the Texas coast who don’t have lights up yet, much less Christmas lights.

God’s love in Advent is strong hands who join with other hands in Mexico and Kenya and Thailand – and every place a devoted Presbyterian missionary reaches out to take the hands with people in need of God’s love.

Love is STRONG HANDS taking hold of weak hands!

We are God’s people! The congregation is blessed with gifts and skills and strengths of all kinds. We have STRONG HANDS. We bring God’s HOPE and PEACE and LOVE anywhere we see weak hands.

Let’s look for weak hands all this week. Let’s pray for Christ to put someone in front of us this week, and show us what we can DO by Christ’s example that will be FOR them. Let’s reach out and grab hold of the work that Christ will show us to do by the light of these candles.

Then come next Sunday, let’s gather back here in God’s sanctuary, and rejoice and sing aloud over what God is doing in a world of darkness and fear, ...and what we have been able to do with the light God has put in our strong hands.