

Third Sunday in Advent

REBELS REDEEMED

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Third Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Chris Repp

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

The book of Zephaniah begins with the condemnation of the whole earth. "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord. (1:2) It ends with our pericope, a message of hope for a faithful remnant. For our purposes, we need to infer from the good news of our text (and the context of the whole book) the bad news it addresses before the good news can make any sense. However, Zephaniah's bad news is for the

unfaithful, and his good news for the faithful – separate groups. In order to make sense of this for Christian preaching, my analysis relies upon the Lutheran conviction that the faithful are nonetheless also a subset of the unfaithful – simul iustus et peccator (saints and sinners at the same time), and so God’s bad news and good news both apply to us.

DIAGNOSIS: Reprobate

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Reproached

A once-great nation has been brought low and now faces disaster. Attacked and threatened from without by enemies who seek to destroy (2:8ff), while simultaneously undermined from within by rulers and elites who turn out to be shameless opportunists (3:1-5), serving their own ends at the expense of their compatriots, especially the most vulnerable (e.g. the lame and the outcast of 3:19) but also at the expense of the nation as a whole (all of chapter 1). The diagnosis works as well for our country in our time as it did for Judah of two-and-a-half millennia ago, does it not?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Recalcitrant

And yet even in the midst of crisis and in the face of looming disaster, those who are not directly affected shrug it off. “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm,” is the refrain of the complacent (1:12). So we grab what we can, while we can. Some of us are even doing better than ever. Of course we want an end to the current crisis, but mostly so we don’t have to listen to the less fortunate whine about how bad things are. Yes, our portfolios aren’t as fat as they once were, but we quietly trust that they will recover adequately, if not spectacularly, in due time.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Rejected

While we continue blithely on our merry way, we have failed to notice that disaster is already upon us. It turns out that we are threatened and oppressed not only by foreign enemies and the internal opportunists whom we have aided and abetted, but now also by God. By our injustice and our complacency, by the rebellion of our deeds (3:11), and by misdirecting our fear, love, and trust to other gods (our 401Ks, our vaunted “way of life,” our military might, our “best-in-the-world” medical care), we have made God our enemy. Utter destruction awaits us (1:2, 1:18), a fate worse even than nuclear terrorism.

PROGNOSIS: Reconciled

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Restored*

But while we are bent on self-destruction, and no amount of threatening will change us, God is faithful even when we are not. So God takes things in a different direction. The day of judgment comes (1:7), utter destruction is unleashed, but suddenly there is one among us who throws himself on the grenade at the cost of his own life, who becomes our refuge (3:12b), our “shelter from the stormy blast,” and we are “hidden on the day of the Lord’s wrath” (2:3). This one is able to take the brunt of that blast, to deal with our oppressors (3:19) and turn away our enemies (3:15)—even God, our most deadly enemy and oppressor—because he is none other than the LORD, YHWH, in our midst—that is to say, Immanuel. His other name is Jesus (Luke 1:31).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Renewed*

Disaster is averted and the healing commences. The lame are saved and the outcast gathered (3:19). But God-with-us who died for us now lives for us, and works among us and within us to change our pride and haughtiness into humility (3:11-12) and enable us to call upon and serve the Lord (3:9). Our misdirected faith is thus redirected from that which is not able to save us

(see 1:18) to the one who is able.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Renowned*

Our now-properly-aligned faith has been God's objective all along. Victory is achieved, a festival proclaimed. God exults in what has been won, and calls us to join the singing. A people once scorned for their injustice and indifference to the suffering of others now is praised for their faith active in love (it cannot be otherwise) as we are seen to help the lame and the outcast, God's hands in the world that do not grow weak. Who wouldn't want to shout and rejoice and exult with all their heart at such a change of fortune?