

3rd Sunday of Advent (C), December 15, 2024
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

The third Sunday of Advent turns a corner and changes the tone from the past two Sundays, and indeed from the Sundays at the end of the church year. The change is from apocalyptic foreboding to hope for better days ahead. There is also a subtle shift from looking towards the end of time and Christ's return to looking back at his first coming as the Christchild. And that is preparing us to go back through the church year again, and back through the events of Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. But that focus of the church year is not about looking to the past for its own sake. It is not, in other words, an exercise in antiquarian esoterica. There has to be in all of this a connection to our lives in the here and now, and to the future that we are living into.

The connection, of course, is that by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit to create faith in us, Jesus' story has become our story – all those of us who have been grasped by the gospel promises and grafted into Christ the vine, to use his own famous imagery from John's Gospel account. Because of that connection, then, we use Jesus' story to make sense of our own stories. But Jesus' story is not only to be found in the four Gospel accounts, or those together with the subsequent events and issues explored in the Acts of the Apostles and the various letters that make up the rest of the New Testament. The entirety of the Scriptures, the whole Bible – Old and New Testament – is Jesus' story, because it is God's story of working in the world, and especially in and through that chosen group, the children of Israel. And that, it turns out, is a particular emphasis of Luke, both in his Gospel proper and its sequel in Acts. Jesus himself, in the last chapter of Luke, on the road to Emmaus with those two unnamed disciples, leads them through all of the scriptures – which, I'll remind you, at that point was only what we call the Old Testament – and Jesus pointed out to them all the things about himself in those scriptures.

With that in mind, I want to quickly survey all of our readings this morning, including the psalmody from Isaiah, to see how they connect with us and our lives of faith thousands of years down the road. And what strikes me about all of these readings – and especially the first three, if we include the psalmody – is that all of them in our excerpts this morning are missing essential context that gives the full meaning to their joyful and encouraging messages. I want to focus first on that missing context for the first three readings, and then see how that colors the text we actually have in front of us.

The first reading is the end of the book of the prophet Zephaniah, the second half of chapter three. The rest of the book is completely different, though. It is about the miserable state of affairs in Judah, the southern kingdom that was spared the fate of the northern ten tribes of Israel in the previous century at the hands of the Assyrians. The book begins with God lamenting the state of the whole world and swearing to utterly destroy it, or at least to completely remove the humans from it. Even God's own chosen people have turned to other gods, and indulged in violence, fraud, and the greedy accumulation of riches. Ruin and devastation are coming for them, God declares, and for all of the neighboring countries around them, who have their own issues.

The context for our reading from Isaiah is similar to Zephaniah's. God's people have turned away from God to serve themselves, neglecting justice and spending their efforts on self-indulgence. And a reckoning is coming for them.

Then there is our Philippians reading. It is a beautiful text, part of a longer concluding section of encouragement. But what lies in the background is the reason for Paul's writing the letter in the first place: conflict in the church at Philippi, specifically a conflict between two of

their leaders, both of whom are friends of Paul. For some reason they are not getting along with each other. Can you imagine that? In a church, two good people not getting along with each other? And so Paul has to urge them to be reconciled, to get back together on the same team so that their actions do not undermine their message or reflect badly on Jesus and his mission.

What is notable in all three cases is that the change of heart that happens in the texts we have before us happens only as a result of patience, grace, and mercy. This is most noticeable in the book Zephaniah, because if you read the two and a half chapters that lead up to where we started, what we have as our reading seems unconnected to everything that comes before it. There is nothing there that would lead you to think that this would be God's response. There is no redeeming quality about Judah that influences God, no mention even of faithful remnant of people for God to work with. Nothing. Just a mess. And yet into that mess God's mercy is announced. It is pure grace.

The book of Isaiah is a bit different. Things are also a mess in Isaiah's time. The northern tribes of Israel are threatened and then conquered, and then the southern kingdom of Judah is invaded. But God in Isaiah's prophecy is not only angry at injustice and unfaithfulness. God is also sad and pleading for the people – at least some of the people – to turn their lives around and look to God for their hope. The excerpt of Isaiah that we get in today's psalmody demonstrates what that will look like, and assures the people that God means to save them.

Finally, Paul's letter to the Philippians approaches the mess there in the gentlest way imaginable. Paul does not criticize the Philippian church directly as he did the Galatians, which the Brown Bag Bibles Study just finished reading this past week. Paul's approach to the Philippians is to rejoice in their faithfulness and encourage them to continue living in a way that reflects who Jesus really is. Other people may join the Christian movement for selfish reasons, seeking to gain in some way. Don't be like them, Paul urges. That's not who you are and it's not who Christ has called and empowered you to be.

That brings us to our Gospel reading, the one reading that is not missing context. Things are a mess, says John the Baptist, continuing last week's tirade. And the message seems to sink in with his audience – at with least some of them. They believe him, and seek his guidance. "What should we do?" John's response ends with saying that God is in the process, right now, of attending to the mess and making things right. And that assurance is what gives force to what he says in the lead-up to that good news. All the examples he gives paint a picture of what life might look like when we stop contributing to the mess and making it worse. Refuse to participate in evil, don't exploit your power at the expense of others, don't taking advantage of your position or your relationships with others. But John only goes so far. He knows that he does not have the answers. And that is why he directs his hearers' attention to the one who is coming.

How then does all of this connect to us? How are these stories also our stories? Well, I have mentioned, I think, in the past two weeks that the world as it is is also a mess. And I expect you didn't need me to tell you that. We face all sorts of crises all the time. But when we take these old stories to heart and make them our own, we too hear the assurance that God is with us in Jesus, in the midst of all of our messes, public and private. No matter how bad things get, God will not give up on us, but continues to work on us with patience, grace, and mercy so that we will not be lost but have the life God intends for us and for all people. May we trust this age-old promise, looking to the future with hope and living faithfully in present. And as we do, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.