

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
December 13, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Finding Peace in Changing Times,
Zephaniah 3: 14-20, Philippians 4: 4-8 , Luke 3: 7-18

It is 12 days until Christmas. Using the Richter earthquake scale, how is your stress level? Mine is high—say 9.5 out of 10. Advent through Christmas is always a high stress period for clergy because of the extra services and activities involved at this time of year. Choir directors and musicians feel the same pressures for similar reasons. Our helping Mary give birth to Jesus each year takes quite a bit of effort. I suspect that for many of us, the stresses of Advent come on top of the everyday tensions of the ever changing economic, employment, climatic, political, and scholastic situations that affect our well being.

In the face of all this, what I am here for today is to find and listen for God's voice as he helps me find some peace amidst these stresses and changing times. You may join me in this search and listening if you so desire. The lectionary scriptures for today help us hear the voice of God as he guides us into his ways of peace in the midst of the many tensions of the world and of our personal lives.

We will learn from these scriptures that the peace of God in changing times, like any peace, comes at a cost to us. Things may get worse before they get better. Yet, it is vital to remember that God is with us through it all and his peace will come.

Let's begin with the rarely mentioned, but still important prophet, Zephaniah. The situation in which God's voice spoke through him was not all that different from our world today. Politics and religion had become more of a problem than a help to God's people in the nation of Judah. For over 50 years they experienced Kings who practiced corrupt politics and religion, and left Judah in a very weakened economic and spiritual state. God was angry with his people and warned them of the consequences of their sins. From 640 B.C. until 609 B.C. Zephaniah's cousin, King Josiah tried very hard to reform the economic, political and spiritual state of Judah and made some good progress, but not enough. In 609 B.C. King Josiah was killed trying to stop the Egyptians from conquering Judah. Shortly after this, the Babylonians were on the march and by 587 had conquered and exiled the Judeans to Babylon. About 630 B.C. the prophet, Zephaniah, saw all this depressing, stressful doom and change coming. He saw the fast approaching consequences of the people's political, ethical and spiritual sins. God spoke through him to call the people to repentance, but they would not listen. They were not willing to pay the price for God's peace to reign. As far as Zephaniah was concerned, God was going to destroy all of creation because of sin just like he did in the time of Noah. Judah had broken the covenant they had with God to be his people, to worship and follow him only. Certain disaster was on its way.

But, out of his love for, and faithfulness to his people, God spoke another word through Zephaniah. It was a word of hope, joy and peace. It was the good news we heard in the Old Testament Lesson. God told his people, even though things were going to get worse before they got better, they needed to know that in the future God

would be taking away his judgment upon them. He would be stopping the disasters. He would be removing their shame. He would be bringing them home from exile in Babylon. He would be restoring their fortunes and be bringing healing to the weak and lame. God told them to rejoice even in the midst of their suffering and despair, for the Lord your God will be bringing you hope, peace and joy! And fifty years later, God indeed fulfilled the promise of peace and restoration. The same applies to us today.

Quite often in the past year, we have heard the words that things will be worse before they get better in relationship to our job losses and bad economy caused by the sins of human greed, deception and idolatry. If humans stop being so stupid economically and ethically, and start serving God first, a great peace will come to us. It will be a peace that includes honest jobs, wise use of money, as well as a sense of well being. All this is true when counseling people in a bad relationship, often the worst has to come out before there is peace and reconciliation if only people will work it to completion. I have found this in surgeries. The pain and suffering is worse before the peace of healing arrives by the grace of God if I am willing to go through rehabilitation. Studying for finals in school and the moments before the test are agony, but such peace comes to us afterwards if we have prepared and done well on the test. If we hear God's voice speak through Zephaniah and follow the message of hope, joy and peace given, repent of our evil ways and follow God's ways, we will find God's peace in the midst of such stressful and changing times. We will realize that God walks with us even if things get worse before they get better.

John the Baptist had a similar message to the people of Judea some 600 years after Zephaniah. The common people of Judea and that area were oppressed in so many ways by corrupt religious, military and government personnel. Taxes and tolls were forced on the people in the temple, in the market place and even as they traveled from town to town. Soldiers were like gangsters making people pay for "protection." Rome had laid a heavy hand of restrictions upon the people. Times were tough and stressful. The people of Judea would have loved to have peace in their lives.

John's message from God was also that things will get worse before they get better. His message was one of radical change, radical change in that the attitudes and actions of the people of God must occur before any peace would come to them.

"Can you picture what John the Baptist's line of Christmas cards might look like? 'From our house to yours this holiday season: Merry Christmas ... you brood of vipers!' 'Season's greetings to you, from across the miles ... who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' 'Let's all pass the wassail cup and gather round the Yule log ... to watch it burn with unquenchable fire!' Not exactly a Hallmark moment, is it?" "Emphasis,"

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The people of Judea were wise for they listened and asked, "What shall we do?" John told them to share with others who had less, be fair in your tax collections, do not extort money from people or threaten to harm others to get your way.

The good news or peace came when John then baptized them to cleanse them of their sins and promised them that God's Messiah was coming soon to baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Despite John's very heavy handed message there was still the hope, joy and peace people sought in it. The Messiah of God, the Savior was very near, and he would redeem them from their sins and give them the peace of God's

love in those stress filled days. He would help them bring peace to others as they reached out in care and concern. We know this Savior to come as Jesus the Christ.

Bible Professor, Wayne Brouwer tells a story about a couple who responded as John the Baptist told the people of his day to do. "It would be Alice and Robb's first Christmas as a married couple. Both had children from previous marriages. They were determined to make this marriage last and to not repeat their previous mistakes. They wanted to provide the best for their children who seemed to get along well. Without going into detail, both had had huge credit card debts that they both believed contributed to their failed marriages."

"While they certainly wanted to give their children a nice Christmas, they did not want to go into debt, either. It was hard because they lived in an affluent area with other kids at school bragging about all their expensive presents. Alice and Robb were determined to spend only what they allotted for gifts."

"In the meantime, the children learned in Sunday school about children who lived in different parts of the world who did not have much. The teacher had pictures and letters from the children. The classes' offerings would go to purchase gifts for the children. The children excitedly told their parents about the children and that they wanted to help. Together the family decided to limit their gifts to one each and send the remaining money they would have spent on gifts to help children in different parts of the world. They felt good about what they were about to do. Robb said what they were doing was in line with the spirit of Christmas. Their first Christmas was one they would always remember."

"The crowd who traveled out to the wilderness to see and hear John the Baptist asked what they should do. John's answer was straightforward and to the point: 'Bear fruits worthy of repentance.' It will bring peace not only to you, but to others who need it, too." The wise people were the ones who listened and asked what to do. "Emphasis," Dec.

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Maybe 20 years after John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul found himself under house arrest in Rome. He was arrested for refusing to worship the Roman Emperor, and for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, the one who John the Baptist said would come to redeem people by the Holy Spirit. Things were going to get worse for Paul before they got better because he was to be beheaded. What an enormous stress this was to live under. But instead of despairing and giving up, Paul placed his faith, his life in the hands of Jesus Christ. He fully trusted in the peace of heaven to come. By the power of Christ, Paul was able to write some of the most encouraging words in the Bible. In the midst of our stress and changed filled times, hear these words again, "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. 8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Paul set a magnificent example of how to find God's peace.

In these stressful days before Christmas, we clergy, choir directors, musicians

and people in the pew need to practice Paul's words to find peace. "W. H. Auden, in one of his poems, challenges his readers to 'practice their scales of rejoicing.' Sixteen times the apostle Paul uses the words, 'rejoice' or 'joy' throughout Philippians." By God's grace in Jesus Christ "a flower as beautiful as rejoice was able to work its way through the hard dirt of tough times and finally bloom." As I said, Paul was in prison, but he wanted his Christian friends to know he was all right, and that even in the most difficult circumstances of our lives, we believers can still rejoice.

"Christmas is a great time for us to practice our scales of rejoicing." As we heard the first Christmas came at a very dark time in the history of God's people. Uneasiness, like in our day, could be found around every corner. "To peasant parents, in an out-of-the-way place called Bethlehem, in a drafty barn among the animals and steaming dung," the Messiah God promised in the words of John the Baptist came into the world. "John's gospel gets it right: 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.' Regardless of what the headlines say, what world crisis the media commentators disturb us with, there is cause to sit down and practice our scales of rejoicing. The pianists tell us they never get through practicing their scales. And so every year Advent comes once again. It need not matter how hard or confusing our circumstances in life might be, Christmas came especially for those of us who are in need. God is with us all — nothing can separate any of us from the love of God we find in Christ Jesus. Let us find some time this holy season to sit down to practice our scales of rejoicing," hear the voice of God guide us to the peace that passes all understanding" and obey his command to share it generously with others. "Emphasis" Dec, 2006