

God's Presence in Hope

Advent 3: Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 13, 2015

As I sat down to work on this sermon, the words of Psalm 137 ran through my mind: By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps....How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

In the midst of news of terror and gun violence and Islamophobia and racism, how can we speak about God's presence in hope? In the midst of so much bad news, I too, am tempted to hang up my harp and sit down and weep. From Christian College presidents who call on students to carry weapons to teach "those Muslims" a lesson, to presidential candidates who spew hatred and racism, where is the good news? Where is the hope?

I can imagine that Israel, upon hearing the prophesy of Zephaniah, was also feeling sad, discouraged and hopeless. This short little book opens with words of doom and judgement: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem."

Zephaniah tells them that the day of the Lord, a day of judgement is coming; a day when they will pay for all that they have done, and for the ways in which they have not followed God and not sought God. This is a day to fear; this is a day of distress and anguish, of ruin and devastation. (1:15)

Zephaniah calls on them to seek the Lord, to seek righteousness, humility, and perhaps they may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath. (2:3) The day of the Lord is a day of judgement for Judah, for Jerusalem, and other nations. In the first 7 verses of chapter 3, we get a sense of the depths of God's anger and despair over the faithlessness of Jerusalem and Judah. "'Surely the city will fear me, it will accept correction; it will not lose sight of all that I have brought upon it.' But they were the more eager to make all their deeds corrupt." (3:7)

What leads a nation or a people to such acts of faithlessness? What causes them to “turn back from following the Lord”, to stop seeking the Lord or inquiring of the Lord? (1:6) What leads them to “sit complacently” and “say in their hearts, ‘God will not do good, nor will God do harm’”? (1:12) How is it, that after all God has done for them, that they are so complacent and indifferent; that they assume God doesn’t care about them or the world; that they believe God is benign? (www.workingpreacher.org; Anne Steward, December 13, 2015)

I was reading a blog earlier this week, by Hilary Watson, a pastor at Lombard Mennonite Church. In this blog, Hilary was reflecting on the power of stories—the stories we tell, the stories the media tells, and the stories that give rise to gun violence and mass shootings. She notes that every time a mass shooting happens, the story is told and re-told in the media. For someone who is feeling powerless, invisible, unjustly treated by society and angry, as they watch these stories with their predictable endings unfold in the media, they can’t imagine a different ending for their own story. They think the ending is a foregone conclusion, that if the first part of the story seems to describe their life and how they are feeling, the ending to their own story needs to be the same. Hilary calls us to offer other narratives, to tell stories with different endings. She says, “Can we create narratives in which [the would-be-shooter] instead goes out and gives away all his money and befriends a homeless man who tells him life is worth living? Can we create a story in which the would-be-shooter goes to the school and lies down on the doorstep until someone asks him what's wrong?”

(<http://gatheringthestones.com/2015/12/07/guns-guns-guns-guns-guns-or-dont-give-santa-a-gun/>)

I wonder if the Israelites got caught up in telling stories of everything that was wrong in their world; of all the ways in which it looked like God had abandoned them, or let them down. Was their news filled with massacres, racism and bullying? Perhaps they had forgotten how to look for, and tell stories of hope, and promise and joy.

Our Advent theme this year is incarnation—God’s presence. Advent is the story of how God chose—and still chooses—to be present in this world. Incarnation is the word we use for God taking on skin, becoming human, dwelling with us in our world. Incarnation is about God showing up in all sorts of ways and places, reminding us of long-ago promises and covenants that are still relevant today; reassuring us that even in the midst of hardship and difficulty, God shows up. Rachel Held Evans, in her blog, says that the incarnation means that there’s

nothing we can do to keep God out of this world. She writes, “The whole story of Advent is the story of how ... God is present. God is with us. God shows up—not with a parade but with the whimper of a baby, not among the powerful but among the marginalized, not to the demanding but to the humble.”

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/persecuted-christmas-2014?rq=are%20you%20being%20persecuted>

The fact of the incarnation, of God choosing to be present in the most vulnerable form, the form of a helpless baby, is a sign of hope. The fact that God trusted humanity enough to take care of this vulnerable baby, to clothe him and feed him and nurture him, should give us hope. Even when we failed at this, misunderstood his message, ran him out of town, and eventually hung him on a cross, God didn't give up on us, but instead, gave us another chance. God raised Jesus from the dead, and sent the Holy Spirit, the Advocate to be with us, to fill us when we are empty; to empower us to enter places of conflict and violence to bring peace; to inspire us to see alternate endings to the stories this world tells; to encourage us to sit with the stranger and listen to their story. You can't undo the incarnation. God showed up and isn't leaving.

The incarnation is kind of like the mustard seed we are told about in scripture. The mustard seed is so tiny you can hardly see it. And yet, the mustard seed grows into a large plant, and once it has taken root, the roots go deep, and it is almost impossible to get rid of that mustard plant. Like this tiny mustard seed, the incarnation in the form of a vulnerable baby, surprises us with its power to change and transform lives, with its persistence in the face of great odds, with the hope that it brings in the midst of desperate times.

A friend of ours, John, is the executive director of an organization that works with the poor and homeless in Kitchener. He told us that last week, there was a message on his phone from a name he didn't recognize. It was the typical “how many homeless do we have in our community and we're bringing in all these refugees? I just wanted to chat with you. Please get back to me.” John wasn't too eager to return that phone call and listen to more refugee-bashing, so he put off the phone call for most of the week. But then he returned it, because he's the head of an organization that speaks up for the homeless and marginalized.

The first part of the conversation was predictable. This man shared that he kept reading things in the newspaper and on the media about refugees, and the homeless population in KW. Not surprisingly he assured John that he wasn't

prejudiced but he was concerned that if the city couldn't even look after its own, how could it take in people from other countries.

John then shared with him that he was incredibly grateful that Canada allowed his family in considering they were from Russia, a country that was hated by the rest of the world in 1981. While the language of terrorism was probably not used back in the 80's they were definitely associated with those terrible Russians who shot down a Boeing 747 in 1983. If it wasn't for Canada welcoming his family, he wouldn't be doing what he is doing.

John then asked him about his story and background to which he shared he's in his early 60's and retired after 30+years of working in a factory that recently closed. He confessed to having too much time and reading newspapers and watching news every day.

John agreed with him that we have to look after the vulnerable in our community but we also can't turn a blind eye to what is happening in other parts of the world. The organization John leads provides a warm meal at lunch and supper. They provide shelter for everyone who comes to their doors and if they're full they have the ability to put them up in a motel. Although they haven't found housing solutions for everyone in the community they have identified 15-20 individuals who are most vulnerable but know them by name and there are people who are trying to work with them. This is not a community where there are thousands of anonymous "homeless people." While it's not perfect, there are good programs in place to ensure people have shelter and food.

The man was comforted by what John had told him. And then John challenged him: "You mentioned you had some time on your hands. If you just read the paper and listen to the news you will quickly become hopeless about what's happening in the world. I want to challenge you to get involved. Volunteer at the Food Bank or get involved somewhere. As soon as you do that you will surround yourself with people who can't change everything but they doing something and you'll feel better about yourself and the condition of the world. House of Friendship today serves over 42,000 people every year, but it didn't start there. It started with a few women who looked around and saw the ravages of the economic depression of the 30's. They asked the simple question of what can we do? They couldn't change everything but they could provide a meal for the men who had nowhere to go after the depression. That one simple act led to an

organization that has 18 programs, serves 42,000 people with 150 team members and 1,000 volunteers. Yes I too could get immobilized by everything going on in the world and what I read in the paper. There's not much I can do, but this is something I can do and so that's what I focus on. You would think that being involved in this work, I would lose hope, but I have never felt more hopeful than I do today because of the people I serve with, and the acts of compassion that I see on a daily basis. So please put away the paper and get involved. It will change everything for you!"

The phone call ended with the man thanking John and saying he might just take up the challenge and get involved.

God shows up. God shows up in a phone call, or an unexpected conversation; God shows up in a smile, a kind word spoken, or in a meal shared with a homeless family; God shows up at protests and marches and anytime we challenge injustice. God shows up in the tiniest seeds of hope planted and tended. Sometimes, we have the privilege of seeing God as we engage with those we'd rather not engage with; as we speak up and tell stories of hope to counter the misperceptions and misinformation that serve to heighten anxiety about our world and fear of 'the other'.

After the many verses of doom and judgement, Zephaniah then speaks words of hope to the people: "The Lord has taken away the judgements against you...the Lord is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more....do not fear...the Lord your God is in your midst; God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in God's love; God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." Zephaniah, whose name means, "The Lord protects", tells the people that God is in their midst, God is present, God has not abandoned them. And not only is God present, but God bursts into song over them—loud singing, as on a day of festival. What a wonderful image of God's presence in hope!

We may not know what to do about the state of the world. We may even find it hard to see hope. But like the mustard seed, like the birth of a vulnerable baby 2000 years ago, we can trust that hope is here, that it will flourish, that this is the way God is present in our world—it may be small, barely noticeable; there may be days when we really can't tell where God is; when we doubt God is even present. But every small gesture of kindness, every word of truth spoken, every story that

is given a new ending is how hope grows. Just like the tiny mustard seed, hope grows and grows, reminding us that God continues to show up and there is nothing we can do to keep God out of our world or out of our lives.

With our lives, we testify to our belief that God shows up; with our lives we place our trust in the hope of God's presence. Every time we show up in places where people are vulnerable; every time we speak up for or stand with those on the margins, we embody the God who shows up in those same places of vulnerability. Every time we show up with courage and compassion in the face of prejudice and hatred, we testify with confidence and hope that God is in our midst and isn't leaving. Thanks be to God.