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Introduction To The Scripture For Advent 3 - Year C

Zephaniah 3:13-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

The following material was written by the Rev. John Shearman (jlss@sympatico.ca) of the United Church of Canada. John has structured his offerings so that the first portion can be used as a bulletin insert, while the second portion provides a more in depth 'introduction to the scripture'.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE
Advent 3 - Year C

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 After a long series of judgmental prophecies against Israel and its neighbours, Zephaniah promised a day of great rejoicing when God is present among God's people. This would bring not only forgiveness and security from oppression, but prosperity and renown among all people.

ISAIAH 12:2-6 Psalms like this one were often included in the writings of Israel's prophets. This one provides a fitting conclusion to the prophet's description of the Messiah and his role in the preceding chapter. This joyous thanksgiving psalm has also been set to music as a responsive chant in #880 in Voices United.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 A wonderfully confident faith shines through these few sentences. Paul's expectation of the imminent return of Christ moved him to urge the Philippians to rejoice with him and to conduct themselves in an exemplary manner. The spiritual gifts of gentleness, thanksgiving and peace would keep them free from anxiety as they waited for the glorious day.

LUKE 3:7-18 John the Baptist's preaching seems harsh and vituperative to our modern, public relations sensitive ears. To his own generation, he must have appeared to be much like the early prophets of Israel, Amos, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Several themes stand out in his message: the absolute sovereignty of God in spite of ritual correctness (v.8-9), far-reaching social justice (vv.10-14), and the promise of a messiah who would come in judgment, not to win a glorious victory over Israel's oppressors (vv.15-17).

Luke interpreted John's preaching as "good news." That may surprise us because outspoken prophets are not welcome today when they attack established power structures as John did. Ultimately John was executed by the brutal puppet-king, Herod Antipas, for accusing him of an immoral marriage.

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 Dating from the reign of Josiah (640-609 BCE), the prophecies of Zephaniah have both a nationalistic and a universal emphasis.

This was a time of international intrigue and upheaval in which Israel played a relatively small part. On the other hand, it was a time of religious reform within Israel led by the school of Deuteronomists who re-emphasized the moral covenant and centralized worship in the temple at Jerusalem. The great threat to Yahwism during this period came from foreign influences which had provided various forms of idolatrous worship attractive to the common people.

Ninth of the twelve minor prophets in the OT, Zephaniah emphasized the anticipated Day of the Lord with its judgment on Israel and all nations. The prophet's name is in itself a prophecy meaning, "Yah(weh) protects." There may be some doubt as to his actual existence. The opening verse is really a superscription which goes to great pains to trace his Jewish ancestry four generations back to Hezekiah, one of Judah's great kings. Zaphon, the city from which the name may derive, was a sacred shrine of one of the chief Canaanite gods, Baal-Zephon. It lay on the east side of the Jordan about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. According to Joshua 13:27, the Israelites captured it and gave it to the tribe of Gad.

The book consists of seven oracles, each designed as a dialogue between Yahweh and the prophet. Baal worship, idolatry and the profane leadership of the priests have a large place in these brief oracles. The forces of Assyrian oppression also lurk in the background as the means of Yahweh's judgment. Could Zephaniah, who some believe to have been a cousin of Josiah, be the code-name of a prophet who supported the Deuteronomic centralizing of worship which Josiah pursued with such fervour for political as well as religious reasons?

After a long series of judgmental prophecies against Israel and its neighbours for their worship of gods other than Yahweh, Zephaniah promises a day of great rejoicing when Yahweh is present in Israel to judge and to save. The nation's only hope lay beyond this day of judgment. These prophecies are given in the first person singular, as if Yahweh is speaking throughout.

The Lectionary passage, ending the book, offers Israel the promise that the coming Day of the Lord will not only bring forgiveness and security from oppression, but prosperity and renown among all people. Like their Jewish antecedents, the early church regarded this as a messianic prophecy heralding the coming of Jesus.

The eschatological emphasis has given rise to many modern misinterpretations as preachers struggled to explain why the imminent return of the Messiah/Christ has not occurred as prophesied. Speculation has frequently misled many into believing that the peace and prosperity they so longed for and found in such beliefs are close at hand. A simplistic and literalist reading of prophecies like those of Zephaniah can be very seductive in this regard. One has to understand them in their historical context within the religious, social and political history of the times to discover their meaning for our time and place. Their main message for today is that history lies within the providence of God whose purpose is to bring all things in a reconciling fellowship motivated by the love envisioned in Yahweh's covenant with Israel, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and brought to completion by the work of the Spirit in all who believe.

ISAIAH 12:2-6 Psalms are not all in the Psalter, but are found throughout the writings of Israel's prophets and elsewhere in the OT. This one provides a fitting conclusion to the prophet's description of the Messiah and his role, and the return of the remnant of Israel from exile.

The two psalms in the current reading cannot be so specifically located within Israel's history. They appear to have been drawn from unknown sources and inserted here as was common in other prophetic literature (Jonah 2; Habakkuk 3; Jeremiah 20:13; 31:7). The second part of vs.2, however, is identical with two other OT passages, Exodus 15:2 and Psalm 118:14. It is impossible to tell which may be the original.

It was Professor R.B.Y. Scott who pointed out that the passage actually contains two brief psalms, vv.1-2 and 3-6 (The Interpreter's Bible, vol.5, p.253). The first is a individual thanksgiving for deliverance. The second brings out the metaphor of life-giving water as the symbol of God's saving power. Compare that with Exodus 15:22-25; Numbers 21:16-17; Judges 5:11; and John 4:13-14. It was well within the ancient tradition that

Jesus described himself metaphorically as one who provides life-giving water to all who desire it.

Water appears to be so plentiful in our country that we have no concept whatsoever of how it could be regarded as a means of grace given by God. Since much of Israel is extremely arid, that is still very true. One of the crucial issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to do with access to adequate water supplies. The incredibly crowded Palestinian city of Gaza, for instance, has a fraction of the water available for its more than a million citizens that the Israeli citizens enjoy in the less thickly inhabited cities of Jerusalem or Tel Aviv.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 No one seriously doubts that the Letter to the Philippians came from the hand of Paul or was dictated by him to an amanuensis. But is it a composite of two or possibly three letters as Gerald Hawthorne, of Wheaton College, Illinois, suggests? (The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p.590.) Is there not an abrupt break between 3:1 and 3:2? And 4:10-20 also appears to be a separate segment. Or are we merely exposed to the vagaries of a man dictating his wide-ranging thoughts at different times? Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, (obit. AD 155) knew of several letters Paul had written to the Philippians, though he appears also to have used this one?

William Barclay provided an interesting solution to the problem which affects our understanding of this particular reading. He separated the whole into three parts written at different times, as follows: In 3:2-4:3 Paul expressed thanks and gave a warning about Judaizers challenging the gospel Paul had preached. Then, much later while imprisoned, probably in Ephesus, he sent a warm letter of thanks and encouragement, (1:1-3:1 and 4:4-23) asking them to welcome the bearer of the letter, Epaphroditus, who had been very ill.

Other scholars have proposed even more radical solutions as to the number of letters in this composite document and how they may be separated. The consensus appears now to be that such partitions make for the sounder hypothesis, although ultimately inconclusive. Because we now have a brief if composite letter, we must try to understand its legacy to the church in its present shape.

However we may wish to debate these unanswerable questions, a wonderfully confident faith shines through the few sentences of this excerpt. Foremost in Paul's mind is his expectation of the imminent return of Christ. This moves him to urge the Philippians to rejoice with him and to conduct themselves in an exemplary manner. The spiritual gifts of gentleness, thanksgiving and peace - gifts of the Spirit so frequently referred to in other Pauline correspondence - will keep them free of anxiety as they wait.

Is that how we feel as Advent moves inexorably toward the celebration of Christ's coming in Bethlehem? Are we similarly free of anxiety as we ponder just what the Second Coming of Christ may be like and when it may happen? Is it possible that in having received through faith in him the gift of the Spirit, Christ has already come to us who are "in Christ?" Are not these gifts sufficient cause for us now to rejoice with Paul and his Philippian correspondents?

LUKE 3:7-18 John the Baptist's preaching seems harsh and vituperative to our modern ears, so sensitive to good public relations. Just think of the furor in this country if the Moderator of The United Church of Canada or the Archbishop of Canterbury had spoken like this?

To his own generation, John must have appeared to be much like the early prophets of Israel. It is obvious too that Luke so regarded him. Several recent studies have hypothesized that John was one of the Essenes, but was not resident in their community of Qumran. That is unprovable; but he may well have been influenced by their bitter opposition to the temple priesthood of the time which they regarded as totally illegitimate and unholy.

Several themes stand out in John's message: the absolute sovereignty of God in spite of ritual correctness (v.8-9), far-reaching social justice (vv.10-14), and the promise of a messiah who would come in judgment, not to win a glorious victory over Israel's enemies (vv.15-17).

When people in his audience asked what they were to do, John proclaimed a

far-reaching social justice (vs.10-11). He challenged everyone who heard him to share their resources. The specific naming of clothing symbolized the essential necessities of life. His challenge received a significant response from the most unlikely persons - tax-collectors. They were among the most despised people in Israel because they were hirelings of the hated Roman imperial government. When they asked for specific directions for their reform, he attacked the crucial issue in the Roman taxation system. It depended on greed. Hired revenue officers had freedom to exact whatever amount they could, regardless of how much they had contracted to collect. John directed them to limit their revenues to what had been officially prescribed and nothing more. No sane tax collector would consider such a revolutionary approach to his miserable job.

John's challenge extended even to the heart of imperial security forces. When soldiers asked for their directions, he had an equally harsh answer for them. Presumably it was fairly common for soldiers to supplement their wages by extorting bribes from anyone they caught and imprisoned. To be satisfied with their meager wages as John required was unthinkable.

These two sets of questioners should be regarded as examples rather than a total list of those who responded to John's harsh message. Even if he did limit his challenges to these two groups, the authorities would draw the immediate conclusion that John was preaching revolution. Every Jew would immediately think of the expected Messiah. Hence their questioning whether or not he himself was the Messiah. John's answer to that speculation described a messiah who would come in judgment, not to win a glorious victory over Israel's oppressors as the popular messianic tradition held (vv.15-17).

Luke interprets John's preaching as "good news." That may surprise us because outspoken prophets are no more welcome today when they attack established power structures as John did. Even in the smallest, intimate congregations, prophetic preaching is not often heard as the Word of God. Church officials are often called in to discipline the preacher who is too outspoken, especially if that differs from the dearly held, accepted tradition of the local power brokers. Isn't that what has been happening in those denominations where the right of homosexuals to marry is being debated? Is it possible that those church leaders who take a rigid moralistic stance on such issues may see themselves as prophets much like John the Baptist?

Luke may have had in mind the moral depravity of Graeco-Roman society of his own time, exemplified by Herod Antipas, the puppet king whose moral degradation he denounced most vociferously. Without question, a significant part of the catechesis of the early church included teaching new Christians to lead a life very different from that to which they had been accustomed before their conversion. Love for God and neighbour was totally different from the way most people lived in those days as in ours. The challenge today for every Christian personally in every walk of life and for every Christian congregation is to demonstrate to an unbelieving world that there is a difference in the Christian way. This was Luke's message as he described John the Baptist as the prophetic forerunner for the Messiah/Christ.

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