

Today we read from one of the Old Testament prophets; one of the "minor prophets" not as well known as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Yet we read his words for good reason, as we shall see:

Zephaniah: His name, in Hebrew, means "Yahweh protects." He is the only prophet for whom we have a geneology of four generations. As the Scripture says, he was "son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah, son of Amon king of Judah."

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 b.c.); a very turbulent time in Israel's history. The kingdom had already been divided - Samaria the north, Judah the south - for several hundred years. Now Assyria was the empire of strength, rivaling Egypt for control of the Middle East. The three kings of Judah prior to Josiah had lost cities to Assyria (Samaria had already been swallowed up) and now paid tribute to this power. Turning away from true worship of God, people bowed to the gods of Assyria.

(Because of his evident familiarity with the city and the royal court, it is probable that he was from Jerusalem. He made bold attacks on foreign ways and idolatry, yet was silent regarding the king - perhaps indicating that he spoke before Josiah was able to implement his religious reforms. (Whether Zephaniah was of the royal family is uncertain - though descended from Hezekiah, there is no mention that he was the king Hezekiah).)

Zephaniah denounced the enemies of Judah: the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia (Egypt ruled by a Cushite dynasty), and Assyria. He predicted God's punishment for them (3:1-5). Then he turned his words upon Jerusalem, where a religious view of life and morality had practically disappeared, and as a consequence tyranny and social injustice were commonplace. (The king (Josiah) was weak and controlled by Assyrian interests.) Malice, harshness, and avarice abounded while honesty, integrity, and compassion hid in fear. Isn't that the case in any age? Where people forget about God, they do not know how to act in humility and care not to listen to God's instructions. Then, despite their cries of righteousness, they build a society of inequity, greed, and injustice - because of the sinful and selfish nature of unredeemed humanity. History is replete with regimes where, in the name of remaking the nation into the ideal society, oppression and theft are institutionalized, while mercy, justice, and compassion become mere slogans for the advancement of the selfish agendas of leaders.

The time-honored formula for true faith was to "hear the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:28), and to trust him (Hosea 6:5). Zephaniah states that Jerusalem had done neither. The administrators of justice - princes and judges - he says, are like wild animals prowling for food, leaving nothing for the next day. The religious leaders are full of treachery and violence. With such bad examples, the morality of the people has deteriorated. The laws governing religion and life were interpreted so broadly that leaders and people easily fell into worship of false gods and idolatry.

Even the memory of the harsh rule of Assyria was lost on the people of Jerusalem. Is there a lesson here for us? Is our faith in God sufficiently strong and practiced to see us through tough times?

Last week I spoke of how so often it is in the barren places that hope can be realized. Even in the desert places God can bring new life. In the midst of a people who had turned away from God to follow false gods, Zephaniah told the faithful remnant to remain confident in the Lord and await the Lord's judgment. He spoke of a day when Jerusalem would be

restored as the home of those who are humble before God; where arrogant and treacherous men no longer rule the day, so that the humble and truthful can live in peace with one another. Possessions and prosperity will not be the basis for morality and right; for the Lord alone will suffice. The faithful remnant will rely upon God for their decisions (vs. 11-13). In that glorious day, when the Lord triumphs, salvation will be offered to all people from all nations (vs. 9-10).

In the old Latin books of worship, this Sunday, the third in Advent, was called "Rejoice" Sunday, since the readings focus on rejoicing that God is at hand. Zephaniah extended invitation to the people of long ago, and extends it to us. It is an invitation to rejoice because salvation is at hand. Disaster and disgrace will be replaced with rejoicing, restoration, and a new future. The Lord will do this (vs. 3:14-18).

Many of you probably know that I enjoy reading history. That's because I find many a lesson or insight or piece of wisdom in knowing more about the past, or how people lived, or the why they did what they did "back then."

History records this interesting footnote: during the dark winter of 1864 at Petersburg, Virginia, where the terrible American Civil War was grinding toward its conclusion. The Confederate army of Robert E. Lee faced the Union divisions of General Ulysses S. Grant. The war was now three and a half years old. It had lasted longer than anyone had expected and the glorious charge had long since given way to the muck and mud of trench warfare. Late one evening one of Lee's generals, Major General George Pickett, received word that his wife had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Up and down the line the Southerners began building huge bonfires in celebration of the event. These fires did not go unnoticed in the Northern camps and soon a nervous Grant sent out a reconnaissance patrol to see what was going on. The scouts returned with the message that Pickett had had a son and these were celebratory fires. It so happened that Grant and Pickett had been contemporaries at West Point and knew one another well, so to honor the occasion Grant, too, ordered that bonfires should be built.

What a peculiar night it was: for miles on both sides of the lines fires burned brightly. No shots were fired. There was no yelling back and forth. No war was fought. There was only the light celebrating the birth of a child. But it didn't last forever. The fires burned down and once again the darkness covered all - the darkness of the night and the darkness of war...

The good news of Christmas is that in the midst of a great darkness there came a light, and the darkness was not able to overcome the light. A bright star shone over Bethlehem and though it faded in time, it was a sign of what was to come. What came was the true light of the world. It was not just a temporary flicker, but an eternal flame. We need to remember that. There are times, in the events of the world and in the events of our own personal lives, when we feel that the light of the world will be snuffed out. But Christmas affirms that whatever happens, the light that began at Bethlehem still shines.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." And so he is. "I am the light of the world," he said, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life," (John 8:12). The big questions are these: Is He the light of *your* world? Will you let this Christmas season slide by like all the others, before you receive Him into your life? By that I mean, take him into your life in a way that makes a noticeable difference. "...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God," (John 3:12). Will you receive him so that you too may truly be a child of God? Will he light your way in setting priorities in your God-given life? Will you

allow His light to shine on your decisions, your family, your finances,  
...your future?

Come with me to a place beyond the glare and glitz of the holiday  
season. Come with me to Bethlehem town where is found the true light of  
life.

The Light of the World *has* come - he is Christ the Lord.