

December 13, 2009

Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 3: 7-18 and Zephaniah 3: 14-20

"It's no 'feel-good' theology!"

Maybe my colleague and friend was just feeling a little stressed with all the Christmas hubbub not to mention the extra pressure clergy persons tend to experience during Advent. Hard to say. Whatever the reason, his comments prompted thought and conversation about what messages God calls us to proclaim. Are we to follow in the footsteps of the prophets, most of whom were castigated for dire warnings of doom and gloom? Or do we pick up the mantles of our contemporary sisters and brothers who preach a prosperity gospel? On the day of our discussion, my friend apparently felt more of a kinship with the former bunch.

"What's with this 'feel-good' theology?" he asked. "So many people in the pews are caught up in the notion that God just forgives anything and everything we humans do because God loves us. Confession in their opinions is completely unnecessary. Oh, the brood of vipers!"

I was quick to point out that God does indeed love us a whole big bunch and that God certainly forgives even the darkest human soul. Naturally, the forgiveness isn't just a broad sweep. Repentance, I acknowledged, is necessary.

A few years ago Sister Helen Prejean was one of the plenary speakers at the Trinity Conference in New York City. You may recall that she ministers to death row inmates at Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana. Her friendship with and ministry to one convicted murderer was chronicled in the film *"Dead Man Walking"* and later in an opera bearing the same title. Sister Prejean is adamantly opposed to the death penalty but she does believe that repentance is essential if salvation is to occur. So it is that she did and yet does pray with and for those sentenced to death. She also continues to speak out against capital punishment.

For me the power of the both film and opera lies in the sub-theme of God's redemptive power. This, I believe, is the truth to which Sister Helen Prejean clings. As long as there is life and breath, coming to grips with one's transgressions, horrible as they may be, allows forgiveness and transformation to become realities even in the face of death.

John's words about venomous creatures echoed by my friend yet ring in my ears. Maybe, I reason, they could be applied to the likes of the men on death row but surely not to regular people who sit in pews in various houses of worship each week. So it is that I can't quite go the whole "brood of vipers" route because it makes me just a little uncomfortable. Frankly, I'm concerned that I might someday find myself in the mix. It's not because I consider myself without sin nor do I agree with the "feel-good" theology often espoused by popular television evangelists. Rather, it seems that like many other decent and orderly people of faith, I find it really hard especially at this time of year to escape the lure of a warm fuzzy gospel. And the perceived incongruities of lectionary passages are even more difficult to reconcile. For

instance, Zephaniah began his career by announcing that the Lord God would make a clean sweep of any and all life on the face of the earth. But he ended with a song of joy and assurance of vindication and deliverance. The same might be said about John who began with name calling and ended with proclaiming the good news. Go figure!

Naturally, what has been omitted is that which transpired between the dire warnings and happy endings, name calling and proclamation. Isn't that the way it often happens? And isn't that how we'd prefer life to be? If we can't escape the threats we'd at least like to skip over the ugliness and pain that occur prior to healing and transformation.

It's funny how words of scripture stir up thoughts and situations previously ignored or avoided. After wrestling with today's lections and on the heels of my friend's criticism of contemporary people of faith, some realities surfaced. I thought about people who have been badly burned then, in order to heal, have had to endure excruciatingly painful treatments. While serving as a hospital chaplain during my seminary days I learned what was dubbed "the sea of fire," a pool of treated water into which burn patients are placed. Despite screams, this is a necessary therapeutic procedure. Would not they have opted for instant healing instead of the journey through dark valleys?

Other images also emerged...images of loved ones who have gone through chemotherapy, suffering nausea and hair loss and muscle aches and mouth sores and more. From all that has been shared with me, there's not much "feel good" about the process. But every single survivor has endured for the sake of renewed health and a new lease on life.

Now in no way do I equate an illness or a tragic accident to a transgression against which both Zephaniah and John railed. Rather the struggles of friends and acquaintances pointed out in a stark way that life is not always easy or comfortable. And the effects of chemo and radiation become evident very quickly. Severe burns, of course, also are easily recognized.

On the other hand, the human transgressions often remain hidden. We can subtly deride those we consider beneath our station in life. We can puff up with pride at our own accomplishments while scoffing at those who stumble. We seem to jump at the chance to chastise a sister or brother whose behavior we deem immoral, perhaps even criminal while carefully hiding our misdeeds behind closed doors. And mercy me do we ever do everything in our power to avoid anything that is unpleasant. Truth be told if we had our druthers we'd opt for a feel-good theology if we could. Well, guess what? Zephaniah and John are letting us know in no uncertain terms that much as we're loved by the Lord God, we just can't free-wheel through life.

Commenting on today's lectionary passages, child psychologist and author Robert Coles wrote: "Too often today our secular experts, the people we (alas) are inclined to heed, have scant interest in condemnation, in moral censure. On the contrary, we are told we ought not be afraid or anxious; certainly we ought rid ourselves of guilt, which I keep hearing in one psychiatric conference or another is 'self-destructive' or 'causes symptoms.' Some of my

students, being friendly, whimsical, ironic, make fun of our prevailing culture (and me in it) by calling a course I teach 'Guilt 33.' They mean that the writers we read" and here Coles listed several religious and secular authors who have had the audacity to expose contradictions in human and societal behaviors. "seem to be, often enough, harsh on all us: willing to chastise us, scorn us, be horrified at what we've done, what' we've allowed to happen."
(*preachingtheWORD*, Sojourners: Sermon Preparation)

Although none of us to my knowledge can be counted as students of Dr. Coles, we may share the expressed aversion to criticism. Surely we shy away from the early warnings of Zephaniah and the frightening proclamations of John. They, as well as the Apostle Paul, ones who, again quoting Robert Coles: "are individuals who forever (and with great passion, conviction, eloquence) scolded all in sight. These were teachers and preachers who had no interest in currying the favor of" anyone for that matter. Instead, they were quick to point out to the whole world their outrage at the injustice that yet exists.

Earlier in the week I received a rather lengthy e-mail from a friend whom I have not seen for sometime. It began this way: "It has been soooo long since we've been in touch. I hope all is good in your world." Following the initial greeting, my friend got right to the heart of what is happening in her family. There was acknowledgment of family struggles and announcement that her spouse had just entered a thirty day in-patient treatment center for alcoholism and accompanying depression.

There was no hiding only admission. Although I am deeply saddened that my friends are experiencing deep pain and undoubtedly some confusion about what the future holds, I admire the fact that two people are facing issues that threaten to destroy. It seems that they have opened themselves to the possibilities that God's transforming grace and love hold.

And this is the joy Zephaniah heralds to the very people to whom he formally prophesied a message of doom and gloom. Paul, writing from prison, does the same to the people of Philippi. Even John after harsh name calling and stern warning softened when he told of the coming of the One who would transform their lives.

Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann says: "Advent is rooted in Israel's deep hope, here voiced by Zephaniah. In time to come, God will be allied with the lame, and the outcasts will be gathered home to well-being. The prophet anticipates a time to come that will be completely contrasted to the present, wherein *the disabled* are rejected and *the outcasts* are forever displaced persons, and oppression is the normal order of the day—so routine we do not notice." (*preachingtheWORD*, Sojourners: Sermon Preparation)

What is so routine in our world that we simply do not notice? What are we avoiding in our personal lives that keeps us from full relationship with God? What will it take to wake us up, perhaps even shock us into facing the conditions around us that stifle healthy behavior in ourselves and in our sisters and brothers? As he ended his thoughts about today's biblical passages, Robert Coles noted: "You can't, credibly, be told of good and bright prospects day

after day, in the face of this world's continuing inequities, indecencies, outright and numerous evils. Isaiah craved the grace we all do, even as he never stopped noticing and denouncing the devilish aspects of this life."

The Word of God is no "feel-good" theology. Rather it is one that calls us to face life in all its ugliness as well as its beauty. It demands repentance. But...it offers grace and love, joy and transformation. Amen.

