

EXTREME MAKEOVER: WORLD EDITION

And Now for the WOW Factor!

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Zephaniah 3:14-20

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.*

***“At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth.”***

Zephaniah 3:20

There is talk that the long debated, much maligned, always contentious health care debate may be coming to a close and to the point of decision. There have been moments this year when I have felt like all of us had been thrown on to the set of the movie “Groundhog Day.” For days, for weeks now, we have rose from our beds to hear the same old tired refrains, the same points and counterpoints, the same divisions more firmly entrenched. But I am still hoping and longing that we will see some significant health care reform passed before the year ends. In my humble opinion, it is long overdue. When it comes to health care, I keep praying for a more just, caring, accessible and affordable system for all Americans HOWEVER that can be achieved: even if that means I don’t get all that I want; even if this means we only take a “step forward” as opposed to doing nothing.

In the middle of the health care storm is Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman. He was a Democrat before he wasn’t. He is now an independent who aligns himself with Democrats but supported Republican John McCain in the last presidential election. Would the real Joe Lieberman please stand up? I am no fan of Joe Lieberman, but that is besides the point! I have been thinking. In spite of Lieberman’s self-appointed gadfly role in the current health care debate, he just might be the right person for this particular time and place.

To help you understand my thinking, I have crafted an open letter to Senator Lieberman:

Dear Joe,
As I watch and listen to the agonizing health care debate,
I have come to believe that out of all the Senators
You might be the most helpful right now,

And it has nothing to do with your status as an “independent.”

You see, we are in this season that Christians call “Advent.”
This season of preparation and patience and penance
provides an opportunity to let go of human ambitions
while focusing on God’s presence and power that is now, and is coming.
This season leading up to the Christian festival of Christmas
ought to be an invitation for the entire Senate
(who mostly self-identify as Christians)
to find some peace and harmony and good will for all.
But unfortunately, we Christians,
believing that the Messiah has already come,
become arrogant and complacent.
We have a tragic propensity to assume that God’s coming is past tense,
and that the future of the world is not left to us.
Advent, although a season of Christian origin, is often lost on us.

But I am thinking that you, of Jewish faith, surely understand Advent.
Waiting for the Messiah’s coming is central to your faith.
You set a place for Elijah each Passover.
You light candles for justice and peace each Hanukkah.
You know that Advent means “coming”
something’s afoot,
change is about to happen.
And that the “something” is ultimately out of our control.
Still, you dare to hope for that coming.
You pray for the dawn, for letting go of self-interests
in hope of something larger than we can see .

You know that Messiah’s coming will bring both conflict and comfort.
You know that Messiah’s coming will make our agendas pale, put our best efforts to shame.
You know that Messiah’s coming will surprise both Republicans& Democrats alike.

Talk with the Senators, Joe.
Remind them that the Messiah, perhaps already here, is coming.
Maybe, just maybe, if they can hear you they can look beyond themselves
beyond their human cravings for power and lust to win,
towards something larger than themselves,
towards a justice that reaches to the last and least,
towards a humility that can put aside party pride for human decency and compassionate care.

Talk with the Senators, Joe.
You understand Advent,
And right now, we desperately need Advent.

Peace,
Mike

(Adapted from a letter written by Rev. Katherine Hawker in 2000 following the presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush)

Advent is that time of year when we remember that God has come AND that God is still coming. But for many of us, the meaning of this season is often lost on us. We want to move on to Christmas – and skip Advent altogether. We want to get on with the celebration, get on to the presents, get on to the birth. We don’t want to wait. But folks, it isn’t Christmas yet.

Did you notice in our Hebrew scripture reading today a strange Advent irony? Zephaniah speaks of God having come, albeit both in the past and present tense. He says: “God has taken away the judgments against you” and “God has turned away your enemies.” What Zephaniah speaks of is a done deal. It has already happened. But he also says: “God is in your midst.” This is present reality. It is a world of hopeful, hope-filled presence. God is here. God is now.

But in this same text there is a sense that God has not come, too. There is still much to be waiting and longing for. There is still a lot of God that is yet to come. There is still a lot of longing that is yet to be fulfilled and Zephaniah hears God speak of a day and of a time that is still yet to come. There is still a liberation for the oppressed, a healing for the sick, a justice for the outcast that is yet to be accomplished.

Zephaniah tells of a time – we don’t know when – when God will renew the people in love and will exult over them with loud singing as on a day of festival. So Zephaniah imagines God saying:

*I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.*

All of these words, whether just preacher talk, or a prophetic rant, or the recorded memory of people of faith, or the very voice of God, speaks of a time that will be, but is not yet.

Did you catch the irony? God has come. God is here. God is still coming. We understand and live this irony all the time.

If you were to tell your story, you would speak of times when God had come. You would speak of times when you sensed God’s blessing and grace in a very real and special way. You would speak of times when nothing but the very Spirit of God sustained you and lifted you up through a terrible time. You would speak of times when dreams did come true and hopes were realized.

But at the very same time, you would speak of things that are not yet – that are yet to be realized. You would speak of things that you long for and hope will come to pass. Maybe it’s a life-giving relationship – a shared partnership – that you are waiting for. Maybe it is healing and reconciliation for a treasured relationship that is broken. Maybe it’s a long-awaited cure or fix to a health concern for yourself or for someone you love. Maybe it is just the reassurance of having health insurance itself. Maybe it’s a pursuit of justice for yourself or for those you care deeply about that is yet to be realized.

We all know what it means to experience the wonder of abiding grace and presence. But we also know what it means to wait for a deep longing, a dream that is yet to be. As Christians, Advent reminds us that while God has indeed come in powerful and transforming ways, God is still coming...and there is yet more God that is still to come. It is never a done deal.

And because we know that God has come in the past; and because we experience the presence of God in the here and now; then we can wait with confidence and hope in our God who will surely, surely come.

Did you notice all the singing in our text today? Zephaniah suggests that while we wait, we might as well sing. Now that is what I call Advent faith. This instruction from the prophet reminds me of famous poem, written by that famous Daytonian, Paul Laurence Dunbar. The poem is called “Sympathy.” Maya Angelou even picked up one of the lines from this poem as the title of her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She even wrote her own poem with that same title. Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote:

*I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and first bud opens,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals –
I know what the caged bird feels!*

*I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with keener sting –
I know why he beats his wing!*

*I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, --
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –
I know why the caged bird sings!*

What strikes me about the Zephaniah text and the Dunbar poem is that the singing that is done is a singing that is voiced “ahead of time” and in spite of current pains and struggles and injustices. The singing is not put off to “one day,” or “at that time”...but the singing is done now: “*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.*” It is a singing done NOW for God who has come and is present. It is singing done NOW while we wait for more God, who is coming.

When my partner Dan gets control of the television, you can rest assured that he will tune in to some home improvement show, whether it is *Design on a Dime*, or *Designed to Sell*, or *Color Splash*, or *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. And my first response to these selections is “Ugh! Do we have to watch these again?” But it doesn’t take me long to get hooked. If I get started watching an episode I will end up having to watch it to the end to see the outcome of the project...to watch the WOW factor on full display.

But I have noticed that the WOW factor is not something that happens just at the end of the show. The WOW factor is present from the very beginning of the show when the home owner’s and designers and architects all begin to imagine how things could be better, how what is drab and lifeless can be transformed into something new and amazing, how a particular paint color and a particular fabric choice can “pop,” how their WOW vision can be translated into the WOW factor.

And when it comes to the journey of faith, and our faithful work of justice and love, we must never forget the importance of the WOW factor that begins with our wildest imaginings...imagining the world as God intends...imaging our lives as God intends...imagining love. Can we envision how the freedom and wholeness and peace and love might be enfolded in us? Can we envision what justice might look like, whether it be in health care reform or in GLBT equality or civil rights? Without the WOW factor being envisioned, there is no WOW factor ever achieved.

Prophets almost never get their verb tenses right, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it, not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone.

To this divine Mystery we are all dancing. God may lead but it is entirely up to us whether or not we will follow. And just because God sends a prophet to tell us how life on earth can be more like life in God's realm does not mean any of us will quit our day jobs to make it so. God does act. Then it is our turn to act. God responds. Then it is our turn again. The only things that is absolutely sure in this scenario is that we have a dancing partner who is with us and for us. This is our promise as people of faith. It is often all we have to go on. And faith is our unreasonable and stubborn willingness to trust that God will be a part of whatever happens next – and this is enough to make prophets and poets, and yes, EVEN YOU AND ME burst into song. People of faith don't wait to see how things will turn out first. People of faith sing ahead of time – even as they wait -- for we know why the caged bird sings!

If there are any big changes going on with you right now – if something is underway you cannot predict the end of, and you are feeling the weight of oppression, depression, despair, or injustice – then you might try following Zephaniah's and Paul Lawrence Dunbar's lead. While it would certainly be nice to have some details about how it will all turn out that is not really necessary is it? You know how God has acted in the past, and you know what happens when people say "Yes, thank you very much, I'd love to dance."

And given all of that, I don't know why you would wait to sing and dance until you knew for sure how it all turned out. Quite frankly, you seem to me like just the kind of people who would bump into each other getting out on the dance floor before the band leader ever showed up. You seem to me like just the kind of people who would start singing, well, ahead of time.

And now for the WOW factor:

Sing, shout, rejoice and exult with all your heart, O Cross Creek Church! God has taken away the judgments against you and has turned away your enemies. God is in our midst, you shall fear disaster now more. Do not let your hands grow weak, God is in our midst;

Thanks be to God for what God has done and is doing. Oh yes, we know why the caged bird sings!

But let's not forget what God will do. Let's not forget about the God who is still coming. Let's not forget that there is more WOW to come.

And now for more WOW factor:

God will rejoice over you, O Cross Creek Church, with gladness, God will renew you in love; God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. God will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. God will deal with all your oppressors at that time. God will save the lame and gather the outcast, God will change our shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time God will bring you home, at the time when God gathers you; for God will make you, Cross Creek Church, renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth,

Yes my friends, we know why the caged bird sings!

As the child who had never before been to a Christmas Eve service said when asked what it was like: "I want some of that 'Umphant.'" "What's that?" the child was asked. "You know, it's what those people were singing about – 'O come all ye faithful, joyful and try umphant.'" I'd like to try some of that 'umphant.'

O come on folks, loosen up. Relax. The candle is pink for goodness sakes. Let's try some of that 'umphant' even while we wait. Let's live into the WOW factor of this Extreme Makeover: World Edition that God is calling for this Advent. Yes, we know why the caged bird sings! Amen.