

Pentecost 24, Proper 28, Nov 19, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Zeph. 1:7, 12-18, Psalm 90:1-12, I Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matt. 25:14-30 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

As I was thinking about today I found one word coming to my mind that seems to do a great job of summing up the conflicting textures of this religious/secular season: expectation.

Some of us – most of us, I suspect – are looking forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas as moments that offer some light and joy amid the literally dark days of winter, and the figuratively dark days our culture is experiencing.

Others substitute the word “dread” for “light and joy” in the “looking forward” department. I’m guessing that today’s first reading will resonate more with this second group than the first!

A friend of mine who is a priest in England described Zephaniah’s words as “very Goth.” “Goth” is, if you don’t know, a subculture that’s adopted black – both literally and figuratively – as its badge of identity. Goths wear black clothing, dye their hair black, wear black eyeliner, paint their fingernails black, and often power their faces white: corpse-like, in other words. In part it comes out of a sense that the future holds no real promise, that everything’s “going to hell in a hand basket” and so why bother? The outward and visible is a symbol for their inner lives. You can see how Zephaniah would resonate, with all his scary words and images! The day of the Lord is: bitter, and inescapably filled with wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom, terror!

It’s almost as if Paul’s responding to exactly that set of images. Yes, he says, there’s travail in life, and the possibility of a dark future. But ultimately – because by baptism we are already children of the day – we’ve been given the tools not simply to ‘ride out the storm’ but to transform it. If Zephaniah resonates with those who have a negative view of the seasons to come, Paul’s appeal is to those whose expectations are more positive, *and* who are willing to work to bring expectations into reality.

Each writer in their own way is seeking the same end: to remind every person of good will, every faithful person, of the dangers of complacency. This is what *will* happen if you get too complacent, Zephaniah says – or, rather, yells(!). Here’s what *will* happen if you avoid complacency, Paul says.

Jesus is talking to both groups! His story of the master and his three servants is about fear and complacency, and trust and risk. The first two servants trust in a positive outcome, and they’re willing to engage in prudent risk-taking because they believe in the potential for goodness of such risks offer. The third servant was afraid to trust, so he wouldn’t risk; he was, instead, hoarding against a potentially negative future.

All the readings are saying the same thing, it seems to me: for those who live by scarcity and injustice, hoarding rather than sharing their resources at the expense of the poor....well, in that direction lies their own self-destruction. Giving in to fear is a doorway to all of the negative things Zephaniah and Paul and Jesus describe.

The readings also offer a positive vision, the flip side of fear in these readings: trust. It's most obvious in Jesus' story; and it underpins the promise implied by Zephaniah and identified by Paul. Our faith calls us to trust: trust that the promises of God which permeate the bible aren't fake, or deceptive, or hollow, that they have substance to them, they mean something that's ultimately imbued with grace and truth and joy, something that promises celebration.

For those who turn to God, Jesus and Paul both say, for those who practice justice and take risks for a greater good, the world is alive with possibility – divine and human. God wants us to flourish and to use our resources for the well-being of our communities. It's a bold recognition that the level of our active engagement contributes either to the increased presence or the noticeable absence of God's Spirit in our world.

And there's certainly a hunger – a spiritual hunger – for what we as people of faith have to offer – our world is full of people seeking some sort of affirmation of God's love for them, and one of the ways they seek that affirmation is by associating themselves with communities of Christians – with people like us. That's why, I'm convinced, that in times of stress and crisis, **and** in times of great human celebration, people we otherwise never see, show up. And why should we be surprised? We offer meaning and transcendence in a world that's lacking both – a world that's otherwise empty and meaningless.

What was that word I began with? Expectation. We can mold and channel our expectations. We don't have to be bound by those of others. We can forge our own expectations and – our faith tells us – we should - for that's a choice we have and can make! Trust in God's promises! Take prudent risks! Face the future in hope rather than fear.

My expectation about this coming Thursday is that it **will be** a day of celebration. Not because it's somehow magically infused with celebration but because I'm going to celebrate! I **am** grateful and thankful – I **will be** grateful and thankful – because when I stop to think about it, I have so much to be grateful and thankful for – including, but not limited to, my family, all of you, this place, this island, this part of the world, my health, my opportunities. And I give thanks for my faith, and that God comes to me – to us – moment by moment, in Jesus and the Spirit. And maybe, just maybe, I can carry over this thankfulness beyond the one mandated day!

Today's readings call for that carry-over. They remind us of our need, as Christians to be alert, to be aware of the God-moments, disguised as chance encounters, harmonious coincidences, dreams, and unexpected events – **and to be thankful for them!** Will we sleep through God's visitations in our lives, and miss the opportunity thereby to celebrate and give thanks? So think on that, think on the question the poet Mary Oliver has asked in this context: **"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"**

God **is** seeking our wholeness and our salvation, and hoping that we will embrace the grace which undergirds us. Let us commit that we will do our very best to be alert to angels in disguise – the ones bringing tidings of great joy and inviting us to joyful, creative transformation – and, that we'll listen to them, and we'll act.