

December 13, 2015 - 3rd Sunday of Advent

“No Fear” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-18

During Advent, we have been looking at what it means to expect an unknown future and how to wait for that future's arrival. On the first Sunday of Advent, we talked about placing our hope in God's promises. Last week, we learned that preparing for Christ means becoming like Christ, like the one for whom we are waiting. Today, we are considering our focus, the worldview we are building for ourselves and its foundations. Underneath each week I have been attempting to critique our culture of fear. This week, our sermon title is “No Fear”.

When Kate and Rhiannon and I lived in Montana, I started a snowmobile ministry down in Crandall, WY. Highway 212, which was the only way in or out of Cooke City, our little town out there, closed to the east of town every winter, which meant about 5 full months. The people who lived along Chief Joseph Highway in Crandall, Wyoming had to snowmobile to church. I thought it would be easier, and more exciting, if I snowmobiled down every other week rather than 7 or so people coming up to us. So I would do a Sunday evening service down there.

The first two or three times I went down, I would travel with Del and Shari and Mike and Bertie, who were best friends and neighbors in Sunlight Valley in Crandall. Sometimes there would be 15 people at those services. I felt like the early Lutheran pastors who had three churches and would travel in the winter by horseback to their next church, or like the Methodist circuit riders, except on a snowmobile. One of the snowmobiles I took down had been shot in a fit of anger by a shotgun through the engine block.

Then, one Sunday, everyone left church on Sunday. The Crandall crew had not been there that Sunday. I got all packed up and put on my snowsuit and told Kate I was leaving for Crandall. It was about -12 out and windy, but not threatening in any way. I also had a better machine. The snowmobile trip to Crandall was about an hour and 15 minutes or so. Kate asked me before I left where I was meeting Del and Shari and I pulled on my helmet, started the machine and said, “Their house”, and left.

This filled Kate and Rhiannon with something like dread, because the route to Crandall was through thick woods, then up the side of a ridge, and along the edge of the ridge, then into a deep pine forest and then down into Crandall. It was spectacular and breathtaking, so I didn't mind the trip. Up along the ridge, on that Sunday, the trail disappeared because there had been about 4 feet of snow over the previous week. When I got off the trail up along the ridge, I flipped the snowmobile. It was exciting, because the machine also threw me about 15 feet over the side. Because of the new snow, it was like landing in a deep, down pillow. I gave no thought that Kate and Rhiannon were on high alert back at the house.

Normally, I would call as soon as I got to Del and Shari's place, because there is no cell service. When I got up from my pillow, I walked back to the snowmobile and tried to get it upright and couldn't, so I took some pictures to upload later, noticed that I had landed about 10 feet from the side of the ridge, which fell about 250 feet to a dense forest below, and put on my backpack and started to hike out.

In the deep snow, I learned that day that if you are hiking in it, you will only fall to your crotch height, so it wasn't that bad of a hike. I figured I was about 2 miles or so from my destination. By this time, Kate was calling Shari every 10 minutes to find out if I was there yet. Shari was saying to her husband Del, who is a big game hunter and an outdoorsman, "Go out and find him". Del was saying to Shari, with Kate on the other end of the phone, "He will be fine. I don't want to embarrass him." Once an hour and a half or so past the deadline of my arrival, Shari finally convinced Del to go looking for me. He came upon me just as I appeared on the road from the pine forest. We rode back up to the snowmobile, which only took about 15 minutes, and got me running again.

At no point in my exciting little adventure, which I have documented with pictures, was I ever afraid or concerned about the outcome. Even when the snowmobile threw me, I wasn't afraid. Kate and Rhiannon, however, had created a whole world of scenarios that went from the mundane but threatening to the catastrophic and lethal. My worldview never traversed into disaster. I had complete confidence that I would make it to Del and Shari's, that I knew how to handle the environment I was in, that I was able to physically do whatever I needed to do. I was cold, though. It was really cold that day.

I use the story to show that the same events can generate completely different unknown futures. Kate knew that something had happened, but didn't know what, and she created a scenario built on fear (I have her permission to use this example). I was the one something had happened to, and none of my scenarios involved fear. My worst case scenario, based on my situation, was that I would arrive at Del and Shari's after sundown and we would have to get the snowmobile in the morning.

John the Baptist gives us a pretty disturbing picture today. He is excoriating the Pharisees and casting judgment upon them. In fear, the people ask what they should do. John gives them some answers and then tells them what the coming of the Messiah will be like. It will be like a farmer with a winnowing fork gathering up grain from the threshing floor. This is a violent activity. A winnowing fork is a fearful instrument. There is fire involved.

But listen to what Luke says about the excoriations, the tough demands on what to do, and the coming of the Messiah. Luke says, "with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people" (Luke 3:18). This is good news. How can this be Good News?

It can only be Good News if the worldview it inspires is not built on fear, but instead on hope, joy, love and peace. Fear, for those who believe in the coming of the Messiah, is not part of the expectation of the unknown future. Fear is a state of being, a state of the soul. Fear lurks and distorts the world, tilting it toward a future filled with disaster and destruction. This is why we feel so disoriented and dislocated during an election season, because politicians and governments function best when people are afraid. We are willing to give up freedoms, we are willing to suspend rights for a particular group of people or everyone, we are willing to consider military operations on our own soil, all just so we don't have to deal with what we fear. Fear builds worlds and those worlds require fear be at the root of our being. Worldviews built on fear create fearful worlds.

Or, we can take a prophetic approach to the state of our being, as individuals, as a church and community, as a country, and relocate ourselves in something not built on fear. The prophet looks at the world, and by the vision granted by the power of God, and sees a network of causes and effects, and then the prophet calls them out. “You have done this; now this will happen. God’s promise to you was this, but you did that. Now, this is the outcome.” Prophets are realists who see things as they are right now. They say, “You have built your world around fear, around hate, around personal desire, and now this is the world you live in - a world of slavery, a world of war, a world of famine and absence.”

The prophet calls out the reality of the present situation and then radically relocates the state of our being, wrenching us out of the reality of fear and shattering those realities with a new reality, one in which the world is built by God. This is why Zephaniah can say to the Israelites, “The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;

you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ 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

¹⁸ as on a day of festival. (Zeph 3:15b-18a)

A blogger I saw named Marshall Jones, Jr. said that the opposite of fear is not courage. Courage is the action we take in the face of fear. Fear, being a state of being, is not about action. It is about worldviews. He says the opposite of fear is faith. This is what Zephaniah is telling us. Faith in the presence of God among us is how we overcome fear. The purveyors of fear want you and I to remain in fear. They will not be changed. They feed on fear, like the underworld creatures they have devoted themselves to. So don’t live in their world anymore. Choose No Fear.

Paul gives us some categories to focus on when we notice the presence of fear, when we are moving our soul furniture out of God’s house. Instead of moving to that place where the unknown future is filled with things to protect yourself against, people who want to kill you and steal your country and future, instead of mortgaging your spiritual future to a worldview of fear and destruction and death, Paul says,

“⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be

known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in

everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard

your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:4-7)

Joy and the presence of God are the things which bring peace to each of us. They guard our minds and hearts. Joy, God's presence, peace, gentleness - these are the worldview of Christ Jesus. Then he says,

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

During Advent, we practice engaging the unknown future. We practice the coming of Christ into our lives, into our world, into our communities. Like the Pharisees, if we do not accept the coming of the Messiah, his arrival is a threat. We build a future world based on fear. Or we can build that future on No Fear, on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, beautiful and commendable, on, finally, the hope, peace, joy and love of Christ Jesus, who surpasses all understanding. This is what Good News looks like. This is what our future world looks like. The coming of Christ and the Good News proclaimed by God's prophets. It is also a good way to get yourself off the snow-covered mountain before the sun sets.

Amen.