

Advent 3C -- 12/16/12

“Proclaiming the Coming Good News” Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

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

Many of you will be gathering in the coming week with family and friends for a joyous Christmas week together. You will gather around the living room, the table, the TV and the computer to talk, eat, watch football and look at pictures of the kids and family vacations. You will depart happy and thrilled you were able to see one another and you will look forward to next year. All the words spoken will have been friendly. All the things said will have been gentle, well-spoken and concerned about the other person. I saw this kind of Christmas on TV once.

Perhaps many more of you will face a different kind of scene. In this alternate Christmas week, you will be stepping on eggshells all week long, wondering if you will be incredibly offended by something one of your relatives said, or if you will set off a family argument by something you say.

The veneer of congeniality will hold like a very thin area of ice on the lake, about as long as Christmas Eve services and Christmas morning after the gifts are open. By the time Christmas dinner rolls around though, Uncle Jerry, slightly drunk on spiked egg nog, will drive his Ford F150 onto that thin ice and proclaim that Ronald Reagan was the greatest president ever in history. Grandma Nan, whose tolerance for spiked nog is much lower than Uncle Jerry's, will ask you in a loud voice why you haven't used your English degree to do something constructive, and then lean into your girlfriend and ask how many children you two are planning on having. Your father, who didn't even bother with the egg nog, will start to tell the story of the time he had to spring you from jail, but really the story is a one-up game to show how great your sister who made it good really is the better child compared to you. Great-uncle Fred, who has been glaring at Uncle Jerry this whole time, will set his elbows on the table and say to no one in particular, *“I remember when I was arrested outside the IBM factory back in '92. That was a great day of public action against the government and corporations.”* You listen, and far down the lake, you hear the quivering pop and hum of the ice cracking. Very soon, Uncle Jerry's Ford F150, a clown car of relatives filled beyond capacity, falls through that thin ice and the thin veneer of warmth that had been carefully constructed last night and this morning becomes icy and cold.

I have said many times that what we say matters. During the holidays, many of us try hard to live by Linus' quote during Halloween, *“There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people - politics, religion and the Great Pumpkin”*. Most of us will fail. I will make a confession with many of you that part of the reason I became a pastor is that I no longer am held by Linus' rule. People expect pastors to say religious things in public situations. But it also comes with a dark side. It also means everyone around me no longer feels beholden to the Linus rule, either. People say all kinds of things to ministers they would never say to other people. Often, they feel obligated to say things.

Language - what we say, how we say it, and why we say it - has always fascinated me. Words, I have always believed, have power. Words can often hurt even more than sticks and stones, contrary to what we were taught when we were children. This is because words *do things*. Words can *change people, events and history*. Words can transform. Words can reverse years and years of harm. Words can call us out to achieve far greater things than if something had never been said at all. Words motivate.

During this time of Advent, we are paying special attention to the Prophets of Old and what they had to say. John the Baptist is also considered a Prophet and what he has to say does the same thing as the Prophets of the past. Prophetic language is at once very different from what you and I say on any given

day, and also it is similar. If we operate from an agreement, which I will admit is contrary to what many of us have been taught, that words and language do in fact *do things*, then we will begin to understand that our attention to what we say, how we say it and why we say it matters far more than we think.

Today, we hear Zephaniah speak good words to the Hebrew people. But this celebratory, soaring language begins from a much darker place. The beginning of chapter 3 takes through a traditional prophetic trajectory. God speaks, the prophet saying, “*Thus says the Lord...*”, and judgment is called out against the Hebrew people. Then, God speaks again and the people are called to repentance. Then God speaks and the people are called to restoration and redemption. Each of these stages come about by God’s language, God’s words. God’s words *do something*. But what do they do? Whenever I read the prophet’s I always wonder about this. Did the judgment really happen or was it simply said? What does restoration look like when all the language is in the future? Did it happen; does it happen?

I am pretty sure I am thinking about God’s language all wrong, however. If words and language do things when spoken, then all the more so with God. Creation, if you remember, exists in Scripture because of what God said. I believe that for the ancient Hebrews, God’s spoken judgment was the equivalent of actual judgment experienced. God’s spoken call to repentance was the act of repentance. And God’s spoken redemption was the experience of redemption. What the prophet said mattered because what the prophet said changed things. The word of God spoken into exile, disaster, despair frees people, restores people and lifts them into a state of soul which can say with Zephaniah, “*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!*”

In our day and age, so much of our language is commentary. It is intended to reflect on what has already happened. So much of our language is self-promotion and self-justification. It is intended to alter how you perceive me or how I am supposed to perceive you. So much of our language is co-opted by politics and industry. It is intended to make you vote or buy things, and then, in your voting or your buying, you reinforce the reality of what you voted for or bought.

But prophetic language, theological language, is different. Language which begins “*Thus says the Lord...*” or “*Woe to you...*” is the language of proclamation, the language of words intended to change things. Prophetic language, like the language John the Baptist is using today, relies heavily on metaphor. An example of prophetic metaphor is when John the Baptist says, “*for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*” Stones cannot become people...or can they? If words do things, then maybe stones can become people. But this is an example of metaphor. Metaphors take thing *y* and say it is thing *x*. Metaphors make us think in new patterns and reconsider new ways of seeing and hearing and tasting and feeling we had not considered before. I think of William Carlos Williams poem *The Red Wheelbarrow*, which is a kind of metaphoric reflection. The poem reads:

*so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens*

Metaphors create dependencies where there were none perceived before. They create patterns which now begin to unify and alter how we perceive the world. And in doing so, they change the world. How we tell the stories of our faith, our lives, our world matter.

John the Baptist today rails against the crowds. He uses a metaphor as he addresses them: “*You brood of vipers!*” He calls them to repentance so they might stand in the midst of the coming judgment. Remember what I asked about God’s judgment earlier - does the speaking of judgment mean the same thing as judgment when it is God doing the talking? And here, is repentance in response to the judgment which is actually to come or the judgement which happens because it has been spoken? The answer is “*Yes*”, because in Scripture, the future and the present and the past all influence one another. The answer is “*Yes*” because the possibility of transformation and redemption are always present in the now because of what God has done in the past and what God will do in the future.

What surprises me in this rant from the crazy person by the river, who, if you remember, eats locusts with honey for breakfast and wears a camel hair suit, is that people respond. And they are listening closely, because the question they ask of John the Baptist is, “*What shall we do?*” Since we are talking about language, let me rephrase the question, because I think it will help us understanding what is happening in our relationship with Jesus and with God. The question “*What shall we do?*” really means, I think, “*How can we participate in the story God is telling?*”

Notice who wants to participate? The crowds, who have just been excoriated by John as a brood of vipers. John tells them to share their clothes and their food. This is how you participate in the story God is telling and the story that will continue in Jesus Christ. The tax collectors ask how they can participate in the story God is telling. John tells them to not defraud the people. Be an honest broker. And the soldiers ask how they can be participants in God’s story. Soldiers back in this day and age were often mercenaries. So John tells them to just do the work they have been hired for and don’t become extortionists. Perhaps what John is telling them is to simply do the work they are called to do, but to recognize that now, in their baptism, they have also been called to participate in the story of the one who is more powerful than us, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

What we say matters. How we say it matters. Words change things. The reason for this is because we are story-telling creatures. We create narratives about our lives and we tell that story to others. We care about the stories we hear and the stories we create. This is why metaphors and similes and rhetoric and language matter. They matter because how we tell the story matters.

In the season of Advent, we are allowing ourselves to be pulled into God’s continuing story of redemption. God speaks and the world changes. When God speaks, it doesn’t matter if judgment, repentance and redemption *actually* happens. *Actually* is a word used by people who are not interested in stories. Storytellers, prophets and messiahs know, though, that stories create meaning and create histories and futures. How we tell the story matters. Our proclamations about the faith and what we believe matter a great deal because words *do things*. Stories change things and how we tell them, how we proclaim the story we are living, matters.

Today, God is inviting us to participate in a grand story. In fact, I would go one step further. Once we have chosen to live a Christian life, we proclaim we are participants in God’s great story. We are being written into the play, the novel, the epic saga of God’s redemptive call upon each of us. Jesus is the embodiment of the story we are living. As a result, Jesus becomes a *real metaphor*, an agent of change who alters the world because of what we proclaim about him as participants in a story with Christ as the center.

So next week, you will sit around the table or the living room or the fire with your relatives and friends. What is the story you will tell? What language will you use? How will you proclaim the story of Christmas? How will you participate in the story? “*What shall we do?*” the people ask John the Baptist. Let us find out together as we come upon Christmas week and ask how we shall participate in the story God is telling.

The truck might still go through the ice; Uncle Jerry and Grandma Nan will still be annoying; you may still feel as if you are walking on eggshells. But you are a participant in a great story. The language of God has already changed you. Words change things. The world is being changed even now and the story we are living out is one which proclaims “*The Lord, your God, is in your midst...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 a festival*” (Zeph 3:17-18).

Amen.