

The Great (And Not So Great) Reversal Zeph 3:17a, 18-20 Luke 3:7-18

In the sport of wrestling, sometimes the combatant who seems to have the upper hand suddenly finds themselves on their back or being dominated by their opponent. This is called a reversal and scores 2 points in the match. The concept of reversal - the change of a situation to exactly the opposite of what it just was, is a major theme of our Advent Scriptures.

The prophet Zephaniah lives at a time when the people of Judah live in fear of the mighty Assyria who has conquered the Northern Kingdom – Israel. Even though they are a powerful enemy and the fear is well warranted, God assures the people through Zephaniah that disaster will be removed, that the oppressors will be vanquished and even the most vulnerable and outcast will be brought home, to safety and blessing. This word of hope when things seem bleak is one of Advent’s main "reversal" themes. It is why we read from Isaiah and Zephaniah and the other prophets. God wants us to know that when things are bad... when it looks like there is no possible way for things to get better... that God can make a way in the wilderness. That like a good wrestler, God can flip a situation and literally change the tide of history. Sometimes it can even happen suddenly, at least to our eyes.

In our Gospel reading John the Baptist shows us the other type of reversal in Advent – the reversal God asks us to make. John calls the people to repent – literally to reverse course, turn around, go in the opposite way. But even though the meaning of “repent” is so dramatic, It is a little surprising what John’s specific instructions are when the people ask him what they should do, "Whoever has two coats." John says, "must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your

wages." Now in some ways these challenges from John are dramatic because he is speaking to humans and we seem to often struggle with doing the right thing. For example, we have a tendency to cling to things for ourselves, even things we don't need right now like a second coat, just in case we need the mlater. And tax collectors at the time made much of their money from overcharging their fellow countrymen. Likewise many Roman soldiers lined their pockets with extortion. But even though John's commandments challenge much of the status quo, they are not impossible or even a call for deep sacrifice. John doesn't tell the people to give their only coat away. He does not tell the tax collectors or soldiers to stop working for the Roman Oppressors. John tells them things they can do without threatening their own needs. They are, of course, pushed to compare "needs" versus "wants," especially when the wants are gained by withholding from those in need or cheating or extorting others. It seems that John is telling us that God is not necessarily asking us for big changes this Advent. Maybe there are small things, things that seem quite reasonable, that God wants us to consider as we live in our time of reversal this year.

Jude and I had an Advent moment on our vacation to Oregon this fall. We had climbed a steep 1.5 mile mountain path. Now there was a steeper, shorter path, but we chose to pace ourselves and it is a good thing because even though we took the "easy" path as our son called it, we had to stop and rest several times, more often as we got closer to the top. We were rewarded with a great view when we got to the top and a tremendous sense of accomplishment... until we noticed an 80 year old man coming up the steep path. And he was not winded at all - still looked fresh as a daisy. In conversing with him we discovered he had climbed many of the great mountains of the world in his life, but still, he was 80 years old. Now we sensed we were called to change some things in our life. We could have responded to this little wake-up call about our cardio-vascular condition

dramatically by saying we would train and climb Mt. Everest, which of course, we wouldn't have ever done, but instead, in the Spirit of John the Baptist, we made a resolve to be more regular in exercise and I am happy to report we played pickleball and swam Friday and walked on the Riverwalk yesterday ... Small, doable change that will make a difference. Hopefully we can hold onto this small change throughout the Christmas season as well.

As we consider the two types of reversals, God reversing and healing us and our oppression and pain, and second, considering things we might need to reverse or change, the words of Jesus come to us. Both reversal types resound in his Sermon on the Plain from Matthew: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied; Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh." If we are facing a time of weeping, or are hungering for justice or thirsting for peace, blessed peace, then we know God is working to comfort and heal and provide. But if we are in a time of wealth and plenty, then we are challenged by Jesus' other words, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." We are reminded by Jesus and John the Baptist that we have more than enough, and need to be generous, always, but perhaps especially in this time of Advent reflection.

The truth is we all probably need both types of reverses. We all have something in our lives that need God's healing touch... Maybe we are fighting an illness or are worried about a loved one's. Maybe we are facing a serious challenge and need to stop doing so much or to start doing a lot more. Maybe we are facing an addiction or a deep grief or are afraid of what looms ahead. Perhaps we feel guilt about something we did this year, or something we didn't do. Or maybe everything is basically ok. Oh, we are concerned about our kids, or your parents, or our best friend, but we are ok. Maybe we don't need to make any big changes in how we are living. But maybe there are a few

minor course directions that could change our lives in wonderful ways. Whether you need to make great reversals or maybe some "not so great" but really small and manageable ones. Whatever your situation, now is the time. Advent is the time when we wait for both the Babe in a Manger who brings hope and peace and healing; AND the Lord who as Isaiah says, comes like a refiner's Fire that will purify the people. "Now is the time!" says John the Baptist, "Now is the time," says the Prophet Zephaniah to prepare for the coming of Christ. AMEN

Zephaniah 3:17a, 18-20

The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; "I will remove disaster from you," says your God, " 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."

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount =prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.