

**Third Sunday in Advent**  
**December 13, 2015**  
**Marley United Methodist Church**

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Zephaniah 3.14-20  
Philippians 4.4-7  
Luke 3.7-18

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**The Absurdity of Faith**

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Like most all of the lessons we read during Advent, the Scriptures for today describe two kinds of reality. First, they describe the world as it is now: a world dominated by the rich, the unscrupulous and the powerful at the expense of the poor, the principled and the vulnerable.

Then they turn and look forward to a day in which the tables are turned: a day when the poor, the vulnerable and the faithful will rejoice in God's salvation, while their enemies are done away with forever.

In the Luke reading, for example, John the Baptist announces God's supreme displeasure at the behavior of the Jewish elites who governed Judea in the first half of the 1st century. These royal and priestly classes had chosen to collaborate with the invading Romans in order to preserve their status and wealth, even though this meant turning a blind eye to the way in which the invaders exploited and robbed the ordinary folk of their very livelihoods.

John castigates them for their poisonous hypocrisy. Like the prophet Zephaniah before him, John warns that a "day of the Lord" is at hand, a cataclysmic day in which all their faithless and self-serving ways would be exposed, while the faithful ones, those who suffer because of their sins, would be vindicated forever. I quote:

"I baptize you with water; but one who is coming after me . . . who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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."

Get the gist? The day of the Lord is like a deluge of fire. Pastor Stephanie talked about this last Sunday – that the coming day of the Lord sounded like a scary time. Last Sunday Advent called us to go out into the cold and dark of today, this morning we

look forward and speak specifically about the end – when the faithful ones are like wheat, preserved from the fire and taken to God’s own heart. But the unfaithful and deceitful ones are like the worthless chaff that is thrown into the fire and burned.

I know we don’t like to think about things like that – there are too many people we know and maybe even love who may be amongst that chaff – but the Bible says what the Bible says.

The outcome of that cleansing is beautifully described in that song of praise we heard from Zephaniah. The prophet imagines a world in which the remnant of God’s people, the lame and outcast ones, are gathered to God in such a way that their experience of misery and shame is utterly transformed. The song describes a future where the people of God will praise God for ever, rejoicing in his love and mercy for all time to come.

It’s a wonderful vision: so wonderful that I sometimes wonder if it’s all too good to be true. Of course, I have no difficulty with the part of the story that describes the evil and self-serving corruption of the elites. Who could deny it? At this time of year our political leaders come out with platitudes about peace on earth and the importance of defending human rights and democratic freedoms – but we all know what that means for the other 364 days of the year.

At the same time, in Iraq and Afghanistan and other places we may not know about, governments are killing people in order to preserve and promote their economic interests or to exercise their religious zeal. Both at home and abroad, political prisoners are being denied their rights to legal representation and a fair trial. And the folk who flee these conflicts and come to our shores seeking a fair chance at a decent life are being either turned away or detained while their cases are being examined. We have one presidential candidate who has seriously suggested that we deport 11.3 million people who are living here. I don’t want to get into a political discussion of immigration policies or the economic impact such a move would have on our society-- but we do need to look at these issues through the eyes of the Scripture.

There are those in our own community who approach Christmas knowing they are poor and knowing that neither the church nor the community seems to give two hoots. They know only too well the cold and dark of the Advent season. The feeling is compounded by all the rampant consumption that dominates our cultural landscape at this time of year. I find it difficult to see anything in all of this extravagance except a complete indifference to the suffering of other people.

In sub-Saharan Africa there are kids starving because they don’t have enough to eat. In Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Columbia, children are being sold into sexual slavery so that the rest of their families will be able to stay alive. Even here in

Maryland, there are thousands of families who find it difficult to put a roof over their heads or pay the grocery bill. I feel sick to my stomach. I feel overwhelmed at the hideousness of the injustice which only seems to be made more obvious by our holiday excesses. In the middle of all of this nausea there are too many days when I simply find it difficult to believe that a day of salvation is at hand: very difficult. As we learned last week, Advent is this time of waiting for the Lord to come and sort it all out.

Now, part of my anxiety about all of this is clearly emotional and psychological. It is tied up with my experience of the world, and it is also tied up with the stories I make up in my head to try and make sense of what has happened. But part of the anxiety is also theological: the Bible sets up a puzzle and leaves it to us to figure out.

Let me try to explain what I'm talking about. Here, this world: evil, corrupt, rich getting richer, poor getting more miserable. There, world to come: peace, joy, no more bad guys, vindication for all who suffered at their hands. And it is a great distance from here to there. So, let me ask--how is that distance crossed? I mean, how do we get from **here** to **there**? Particularly when it seems here is getting farther and farther away from there?

On this particular point, the "how" bit, the Bible doesn't seem to be very clear; I mean, it's almost as if the Bible doesn't actually *know*. On my worst and most cynical days, this does not inspire confidence!

Of course, theologians have tried to fill in the gaps in the Biblical witness. Theologians like to do that, fill in the blanks by making up stuff that sounds good. And what have they come up with?

Well, on your far right are the evangelicals who say that Jesus will return with a whole army of heaven and kick butt on the nasty people. Then he'll wave his kingly scepter and the world will return to a Garden-of-Eden-like state in which we'll all love each other the way that God loves us.

But this theory raises more questions than it solves. Amongst other things, you have to ask, 'why would Jesus behave so very differently on his second visit than he did on his first?' The first time around he didn't force anyone to do anything. He invited, he loved, he lived as an example of a different way to be. But he didn't force anyone to do anything. If he had, it would have overridden a human freedom we have; a freedom apparently so prized by God that he allows us to use it even when we choose to do evil. Wouldn't a powerful army of butt-kickers kind of undermine this whole image of God as love, God as the one who invites but not coerce, God as the supreme protector of our right to choose? Am I the only one who sees a disconnect here? Butt-kickers – God is love, hmmm.

On your far left, the liberal theologians say, Darned right, let's pay more attention to the story as it is told. That God became a child, one of us. He was born in our midst, full of grace and truth. He went about the place healing, driving out our demons, and teaching us how to love one another. But then the rich elites got hold of him. They tortured him and nailed him to a cross. Sure, there was a Resurrection, but it's all kind of mysterious, you know--now you see him, now you don't. He lives on in the world as a kind of memory or spirit of good. Perhaps this suggests that God is like our deepest and best self? God changes the world when *we* decide to change the world. God prompts and pricks our conscience, but refuses to do anything other than what we choose to do for ourselves: giving our second coat to someone who needs it, to pick a relevant Scriptural example. How does the saying go?, oh, yeah, God has no hands and no feet to do his work except ours.

But again, I'm really not sure that this theory solves anything much. For instance, it makes a mockery of all those Bible passages which insist that it is not we, ourselves, who make the world's salvation, but God alone. By grace, which is the action of God, are we saved through faith, and this is the gift of God, not of human works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2.8f). If the liberal theory is to be believed, then I would personally consider the whole hope-of-salvation thing to be no more than a cruel joke visited upon us by a God who raises our hopes and expectations, but never intends to meet them with anything more than what we can accomplish on our own. That just doesn't sit well with me.

Well! What are we to do with all this? What am I to do with the anxieties that come out of my lived experience? What am I to do with the theological problems?

Well, when in doubt, I have often considered it wise to take a break from all the tension and drama and tell a story. That's something I learned from studying Abraham Lincoln—when the going gets tough, sit down and tell a story. You see, a story takes you out of yourself; it helps you see things differently because it is happening to someone else. You can make more sense of it when it is not happening to you. And that new understanding can then be applied to your life.

So here's a good story I came across the other day.

The time has come for St. Peter's annual three-week vacation, and Jesus volunteers to fill in for him at the Pearly Gates. "It's no big deal," Peter explains. "Sit at the registration desk, and ask each person a little about his or her life. Then send them on to housekeeping to pick up their wings." On the third day, Jesus looks up to see a bewildered old man standing in front of him. "May I help you?" he says. The man says, "I'm a simple carpenter. And once I had a son. He was born in a very special way, and was unlike anyone else in this world. He went through a

great transformation even though he had holes in his hands and feet. He was taken from me a long time ago, but his spirit lives on forever. All over the world people tell his story."

By this time, Jesus is standing with his arms outstretched – surely this is Joseph, the husband of Mary. There are tears in his eyes, and he embraces the old man.

"Father," he cries out, "It's been so long!"

The old man squints, stares for a moment, and says, "Is that you, Pinocchio?"

This story is not an ordinary story. It is a joke. You see, a joke is different from a story because it introduces an unexpected element into what would otherwise be very familiar. As we listened to this story, we expected that the old man would squint and say "Is that you, Jesus?" We were set up for that by everything that went before – the religious setting, the details about the old man's son. But the story became a *joke*, taking us by surprise, shocking us with the arrival of something entirely unforeseen, I mean we just didn't see it coming. Parables are also like that. They change the rules of the game by introducing something unexpected that takes us by surprise. And the greatest example of this is Jesus.

You see, John's hearers expected that their Messiah would come along to whip the Romans with superior military strength. And they were wrong. And our own expectations, all these years later, whatever they are, are probably just as misguided. I can hear Jesus ask us just as he asked Philip, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me?" (John 14.9)

Whether we are evangelicals who expect that Christ will change things one day by the might of his superior power,

or whether we are liberals who expect that Christ is so much like one of us that he is only able to help those who help themselves,

or whether we are somewhere in between,  
we are all probably mistaken;

because the story of Christ isn't finished yet and we haven't gotten to the punch-line yet. In another part of Luke's gospel, we are told that we cannot know what is to happen, or how. You see only God can tell the punch-line, because only he knows what it is. Just as Jesus shocked the Greeks with his human weakness, and scandalized the Jews by his failure and execution, just so will it be the second time around – whatever is coming, we can't see it. And while we moderns may pretend we have a handle on the story, the joke, the punch-line, will surely leave us all with mouths agape and the only responses available to us will be to be astonishment, laughter and rejoicing.

For that is what we humans do when we are genuinely surprised; we absorb the shock, we adjust our imagination, and then we laugh! Like Sarai at the announcement of her old-age pregnancy with Isaac. Like the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb when Mary came

near with the Christ-child. That is why Paul counsels the Philippians to cease their worrying and just rejoice. (cf Epistle for the day)

He says, stop trying to understand, stop trying to second-guess God. Instead, surrender your concerns into his hands. Relax into that surprising peace which passes all understanding. The peace that is absurd, because it shouldn't be possible, but yet it is. It is the strange peace that we could not have manufactured for ourselves because it defies every effort at human reasoning and explanation.

On my better days I see Advent faith as a choice. It's about believing in the possibility of surprise. It's about believing that our tragic and repetitive history has an unforeseen and unpredictable punch-line coming. And when it does come, it will fly in the face of everything that the evidence or our reason might lead us to expect.

And that's the faith I encourage from you: the faith of a Mary of Nazareth who, in that ancient time of Advent waiting, became a bearer of the impossible to a world that was tired and beyond being surprised. Think on that, she delivered the impossible to a world that just didn't see it coming.

Rejoice, people of God! For while the night may be filled with tears, joy shall indeed come with the morning.

How, I don't know. But I do believe it will come.

Amen