

God Restores Fortunes

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Third Sunday in Advent

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, December 17, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Now, Lord, God of heaven and earth, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be consistent with the way of Jesus empowered by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Singing is something we Presbyterians do because we don't feel comfortable with the ecstatic expressions of joy. In fact, the word "joy" is often not associated with being Presbyterian. This is the third Sunday of Advent, and it is the Sunday when we recognize something powerful that happened in the coming of God to us, and it is the source of deep and abiding joy not just today but for all eternity.

Zephaniah does not get into this joy from the beginning. We have read the last passage of the Book. In a sense, it is a bit of a cheap thrill that we would read the joy passage without reading the rest of the prophetic text, which is really pretty doom and gloom-oriented. We don't like that part of the text. But in order to get to the joy, we must work through the struggle of life.

Yesterday was Beethoven's 237th birthday. I'm sure many of you were just very anxious about that. If you listen to classical music, you heard Beethoven, Beethoven, and Beethoven yesterday. One of the things that Beethoven was noted for was living in the struggle and the pain of life. He was not known as a person of joy. In fact, he was just downright obnoxious and irritable most of the time. Do you know anybody like that? Beethoven's birthday is reflected time for us to realize that life in a sense is like a four-movement symphony.

It is a movement of realization like Zephaniah that the heart of life is the main struggle and the pain. If you read a majority of Zephaniah, you get a distinct sense that the people are in trouble and there is no place to go--not just to Judah and Israel but the entire world is a mess, and God is going to come in and make it all go away. In order for that to happen, there are some things that have to transpire in the people's hearts and minds. The second movement of Zephaniah is about how God pursues the people of Judah until they finally stop and listen. The third movement is about the more reflective time when people humble themselves, are willing to listen to God, wait on God, and get a sense of what God wants to do. In a sense they turn to the God who has come to them, and they pay attention.

And then the fourth movement is this wonderful movement of joy. It is a joy because God has finally broken through to people and got their attention, and they in their awareness that they need to change their behavior patterns of life have begun to do so, and God has intervened and has cleaned house, has made everything straight.

It is in this pattern that we reflect on Beethoven's symphonic works. Beethoven was always known for his tempting to change the order of the movements of symphonies. He would often after the rather majestic and intensive first movements go into a movement where it seems like someone was being pursued and hunted down--the scherzo movement. But after that, there would often be a more relaxed and lyrical pattern, something that is usually more positive and reflective. Finally, the last movement built in patterns of joy and hope. This was an unusual symphonic pattern that Beethoven created, and it was reflective, many people think, of his own life and struggle--that he lived in the tumult, that he often felt pursued, or that he was pursuing something that was not attainable in his life. It was as though God was after him, and he was after God, but they could not find each other. Then, finally, there would be a moment where he would stop and reflect; it would catch the sense of the greater good in the world. He would have a sense of peace and hope, and he would be able to move into the more ecstatic movement of gladness and joy.

This is particularly reflective of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, where in the last movement there is a declaration of joy. Let's call this "Ode to Joy." ?Freuda! ?Freuda! [that's the way it sounded] joy! joy! The people shout in chorus Beethoven's final statement that there is a pursuit of joy that is necessary in the world, and he's having a hard time getting to it.

Do you feel in your life as if you have a hard time getting to the joy? Maybe God has not restored your fortunes yet. Maybe things are still in disarray and confusion. Maybe you feel that God is pursuing you and that you have been seeking God and you can't find God. Well, that's what Zephaniah is about. Many people think that's what the life of Beethoven was about.

One of the problems of the people of Judah, according to Zephaniah, was that they became confused in the orientation as to who God is. Rather than pursuing a god who was the very nature of love and grace and peace, they pursued several different kinds of gods. At this moment in time in the temple of the people where God is supposed to reside, there were literally dozens of different gods being worshipped. Zephaniah realized that this confusion was causing greater and greater cacophony and disorientation of the people. It's a little bit like our culture today. Our culture today is full of boutique spiritualities. Everyone has their own unique spiritual ingredients that they put together in their solution to make sure that their spirituality fits their agenda in life. It's like the people of God in the Old Testament--they had begun to wonder where the God of Israel really was, and they began to embrace any and all gods around them. It was a hybrid spirituality time. Take a little bit of the Greek pantheon, a little bit of the Hindu understanding of gods among all things, worship the stars, listen to the astrologers, and be concerned about how fate will ultimately get you. That kind of spirituality haunts not only the time of Judah, the time of Beethoven, but the time that we live in today--confusion about the heart of the nature of God. What is the solution? The solution is that there is a recognition that we are hungry for something; we struggle to attain something; we are after something, and then we discover that God really is after us. God is in pursuit. God has caught our attention, and we take moments like this to be a reflection, to get in touch with the fact that God wants

us to humble ourselves. God wants us to see that the essence of God is about love and generosity and humility and ?risk. One of the things in Beethoven's life is his constant search for an emperor who was like a messiah. He thought for a while that Napoleon may be that person who would be the perfect leader of the world. He would come and he would bring the republic and democracy to all the world, but then he set himself up as the dictator and emperor. Beethoven quickly wrote him off and said, "That's not the person I'm looking for." In a sense, he never did find that person. He never did find the one who would make everything right.

The sense in which Beethoven searched and struggled for life is like all of ours. We are looking for someone to come finally and set things right. We know that things are not right. We know that things are not right in the world; we know that things are not right between nations; we know that things are not even right between our family members and our relationships as husbands and wives and friends. So, we are on that pursuit of the person who is going to make it right. Beethoven never did find that person.

In a sense, he died, and his biggest hope was that there could be a moment in the future for humanity that was a moment of joy and celebration, but he didn't know how it was going to come about. In some ways he believed that music itself would be that joy--the joy of composition, the joy of creating something that was profoundly majestically wonderful and good. But deep in his heart he never found that peace. He died with his hand clenched as if protesting that God would put him through the struggle and the pain.

Are you going to die today with your hand clenched, fighting, resisting, looking for something that you cannot control or define? The story that is fulfilled in Zephaniah is about a God who comes in love; a God who comes into the midst of people, into the hearts of human beings; a God who comes to make peace; a God who comes to set things right, to turn goodness out of disaster; and that God, according to Zephaniah, is personal. In a wonderful shift of the text in the last six verses, there is a description of He who will do this, and finally the statement of "I will come and make things right." The God that is in pursuit of you is personal. The God who wants to know you is the one who is I want to engage you; I want to make things right in your life--will you engage me? And that's the call of the salvation of human beings, the experience that Beethoven probably never had in his own life. We struggle for it; we long for it. Only the God of creation, the God of Scripture, the God who has come to us in Jesus in the manger is the God who can set things right.

God will restore your fortunes if you will engage the God who comes in Jesus who can do it. And that is the call of the Gospel, and as the source of joy there is only one who can take all the disaster and mistakes, the frustrations of the world, and set things right. There is only one source of deep joy, and that is in the person of Jesus Christ who calls to each of us at this time to change our lives and to make things right. The hint of this text is that as the individual people of God do this and it begins to ripple through the entire nation of Judah and Israel that God will begin to ripple out in the world and bring peace to all nations. It starts in the hearts of the people who first know God and touches all the world, and that is the way that Jesus came in the midst of a few to transform all. That is the source of joy, and that is the reason why we are singing today.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, in the midst of our failures, our mistakes, our frustrations, our disasters, may we hear the voice that You call out, that You are seeking us as we seek You; and in that discovery may we find joy, joy that is eternal and transform-ing, joy that is deep and abiding, joy that is personal and present. Transform us now by the goodness of who You are and the graciousness of Your Holy Spirit. Bring us the restoration of our fortunes. Amen.