

"I will change their shame into praise"
Reading from the Old Testament: Zephaniah 3:14-20
Reading from the New Testament: Revelation 21:3-4

Surely to be found on that list of observations you'd rather not hear but cannot ignore would be: You need a new water heater. Of course, that is not as bad as the scream from the shower that precedes it: There's no hot water!!! When selling our house before the move to Charlotte in 2004, we were informed by the inspector that our recently installed water heater did not meet code requirements, which seemed nonsensical to us because it was just recently installed ... by a licensed plumber ... who one might think would be aware of current code requirements. I mean, who would tell a reputable plumber to install a water heater but not to worry about whether it's legal?

So, I called the plumber. "Dude, what's up with this?" The inspector said that for a garage installation, the water heater either had to be elevated or it would require a barrier to protect it. That's because, sometime in the past, some first-time truck buyer said to his wife, "Honey, you're wrong. I know this baby will fit in the garage." Well, the plumber's solution was to nail a 4"x4" into the middle of the garage floor, which suited the inspector but promised to infuriate the future

homeowner whenever it ripped another piece of fiberglass off the front of his Corvette. And then ... the plumber sent me a bill.

Wait, you want to charge me for your mistake? I don't think so. His rationale? "Well, it wasn't me. It was a former employee who is now a competitor that installed it. So, I think that a *man of the cloth* would understand it's only fair for me to be paid for my labor." ... He was your employee when he installed it. So, it was your mistake. I'm not paying for your mistake. I paid for a code compliant water heater. (Of course, I was thinking, "How dare you pull that tired old *man of the cloth* routine on me. For that matter, yes, I am a *man of the cloth*, and so I know a thing or two about ethics.) I'm not paying.

And then he did it. He actually said it, "If your conscience will let you sleep with that..." Sir, let me stop you right there. I'm going to sleep just fine. I'm surprised he didn't pull out that one final desperate dagger, "You should be ashamed." After all, that is what he was getting at.

However, though I didn't bite his bait doesn't mean that I've never experienced shame before. Shame, guilt, indignity, embarrassment,

humiliation, mortification, infamy. Sure, I've known them all. It's called middle school, right? A tortured tempest of a time as developing bodies and brains pummel one another in a battle for control, identity, attention. The visceral feeling that every tiny flaw is magnified for public display and mockery. You convince yourself that the world's favorite dessert is your humiliation. Whether rising up within you or projected upon you, shame is the sense that you don't measure up, do not belong; the sense that your presence or even just your name at best summons pity, but most of the time brings judgment, suspicion, scorn, mockery, exclusion, exile.

In Amor Towles new novel, *The Lincoln Highway*, Emmett Watson has borne the yoke of shame for most of his 18-years, first as the son of a starry-eyed failure of a farmer, and then as the unfortunate youth taunted into a one-punch fight that resulted in a bully's freakish death and a reformatory sentence for Emmett. On his release, Emmett returns to his hometown, not to resume his old life, but to pick up his young brother from his now deceased father's foreclosed farm and start a new life anywhere but there. His old neighbor said what Emmett had already concluded on his own: "We all know that whatever trouble

Jimmy Snyder happened to find himself in was generally of Jimmy's own making ... But that doesn't make any difference to his brothers ... They're likely to make you feel the brunt of that fury as much and as often as they can. So while you do have your whole life in front of you, or rather, because you have your whole life in front of you, you may want to consider starting it somewhere other than here." (Amor Towles, *The Lincoln Highway*) For unlike Hester Prynne, Emmett had a Studebaker that could carry him away to a new beginning someplace where his name didn't carry a scarlet letter.

It has been suggested that unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong shame is the feeling of being something wrong. (Marilyn Sorenson) Perhaps that is the rationale behind the haunting biblical omen that the iniquities of the fathers are visited upon the sons to the third and fourth generation; children and grandchildren either replicating the sin or living under the cloud of shame for it. Among the more maddening ironies in the moral universe is that the guilty who might benefit from a bit of shame seem immune to it, while those in the wake of the guilty party find themselves drowning in it. Czech writer, Milan Kundera said that, "The basis of shame is not some personal

mistake of ours, but the ignominy, the humiliation we feel that we must be what we are without any choice in the matter, and that this humiliation is seen by everyone."

I think Kundera's insight lends some context to Zephaniah's insertion of this little ray of hope into a predominately harsh message. "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more."

Such hopeful words stand in sharp contrast with the dominant voice in Zephaniah. When I submitted my texts for the bulletin this week, I had absentmindedly written down the wrong citation from Zephaniah. So, I was taken aback when looking over the rough draft and reading these other words of Zephaniah: "Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God ... Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame."

I read that and I thought, *Well, that will put them in a Christmas mood.* Elsewhere, Zephaniah writes, "I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung." Egnog, anybody? "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

Zephaniah is not pulling any punches, having witnessed the superficiality, apostasy, and hypocrisy of Israel's faith. He bluntly assesses what their faithlessness has earned them; what reasonable, appropriate, and legitimate justice would demand. I wonder if the imagery is so harsh because those addressed seem incapable of shame, immune to guilt? The prophet sounds like a parent who finally explodes after having warned the children repeatedly to clean up their act. "I've had it up to here..." "Don't come crying to me when the grim reaper shows up!" The prophet is appealing to consciences that have taken their leave with no forwarding address.

Zephaniah is prophesying during the reign of King Josiah in Judah during the latter half of the 7th Century BCE, and in contrast to many, or most, of the other prophets, Zephaniah is not opposing but

working in concert with the king. The list of kings in Israel and Judah after Solomon reads like a rogue's gallery of miscreant condemnable losers, but Josiah is different. He is just and faithful, a reformer. It is Josiah's great hope to return God's chosen people to the original covenant of faith between God's chosen Israel and their Lord, as established on the mount at Sinai. It was during Josiah's reign that the book of Deuteronomy was *discovered* and the Deuteronomic code was established

However, failed leadership, poor role-modeling, growing cynicism, cultural malaise and indifference combined to bog down Josiah's efforts. And as I said earlier, the contradiction in the moral universe is that the guilty who might benefit from a bit of shame seem immune to it, while those in the wake of the guilty party find themselves drowning in it.

Unfortunately, the people who needed to hear Zephaniah's warnings remained indifferent to them, while the faithful felt powerless under the burden of them and despaired of hope. So, Zephaniah ends his prophecy by turning his attention to the earnest faithful who had begun to lose hope. It's almost as if it dawns on the prophet that the proud, the confident, the self-indulgent, the arrogant, the miscreant, the

con artist, the fool, the insatiably greedy, and the self-satisfied and plush with comfort show little interest or concern in his rantings. So, he turns his attention to those burdened by the present and fearful of the future. The ranting street preacher rarely draws an audience but the parched will stand in line for water.

In a poignant column this week, David Brooks responded to an anonymous question written on an index card given to him at a speaking engagement. “What do you do when you’ve spent your life wanting to be dead?” Brooks didn't have an answer in the moment, not knowing from whom the question came or its context, but upon reflection wrote, "My response would start with the only things I know about you: You’ve been through a lot of pain over the course of your life. You have amazing powers of endurance because you are still here. I know you’re fighting still because you reached out to me. My response begins with deep respect for you.

"The other thing I know is that you are not alone. There is always a lot of suffering in the world, and over the past few years we have seen high tides of despair. The sources of people’s pain may be different — grief, shame, exclusion, heartbreak, physical or mental health issues —

but they almost always involve some feeling of isolation, of being cut off from others ..." Brooks confesses, "In my own seasons of suffering, I've been shocked at how emotional pain feels like searing physical pain in the stomach and chest, by how tempting it is to self-isolate and rob yourself of the very human contact you need most."

He then shares a rabbi's story of a woman with a brain injury who would sometimes fall to the floor. People around her would rush to immediately get her back on her feet, before she was quite ready. She told the rabbi, "I think people rush to help me up because they are so uncomfortable with seeing an adult lying on the floor. But what I really need is for someone to get down on the ground with me."

Isn't that what Advent is, the promise of a God who gets down on the ground with us? Zephaniah says to all burdened by the weight of shame or pain, who need not much more than for someone to get down on the ground with them, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 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 ... 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,"

The proud could care less, at least as long as their fleeting and superficial comfort survives, but to those who know, or feel, or are burdened by this world's pain, the promise of a God who gets down on the ground with us is both power and light.

In Anthony Doerr's new novel, *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, Zeno is a young boy, a second-generation Greek immigrant, who wears heavily the burden of shame, being an outsider among the Swedes and Finns who've settled in small town Idaho. He hears the insults: Olivepicker, sheep shagger, Zero with the weird name. The son of a single father, poor and uneducated, his mother having died, Zeno fits Kundera's description, "The basis of shame is not some personal mistake of ours, but the ignominy, the humiliation we feel that we must be what we are without any choice in the matter, and that this humiliation is seen by everyone." (Anthony Doerr, *Cloud Cuckoo Land*)

Living in a drafty, freezing shack, Zeno's one consolation is the stray dappled collie his father brings home. Zeno gives the dog the

grand Greek name of Athena,. As Doerr describes it, "Though she smells like a swamp and regularly defecates behind the stove, when she climbs onto Zeno's blanket at night and presses her body against his, letting off periodic sighs of great contentment, [Zeno's] eyes water with happiness."

When Zeno's father is killed early in World War II, he feels even more disconnected and lost. At the visitation, he sneaks out the door and walks to the lake. It's the end of March and in the center of the frozen lake, the first dark patches of melt have begun to show. He walks out onto the lake. Nothingness is all direction ... He feels himself teetering at the edge of something. Behind is Lakeport ... Back there he is Olivepicker, Sheep Shagger, Zero, and undersized orphan with foreigner's blood and a weirdo name. Ahead is what?

An almost subsonic crack, muffled by the snow, rifles out into the white. He steps forward. A second crack portends that all the fissures in his short life will join to swallow him up if he goes further. Will he?

It is then "he feels a tug at the back of his trousers, as though he has reached the end of a tether and now a cord is pulling him home, and

he turns and Athena has a hold of his belt in her teeth. Together they go back to shore."

Sometimes, you just need someone to get on the ground with you. "I will change their shame into praise ... I will bring you home." Amen.