

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, YEAR C
December 16, 2012
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18
Love Is a Verb
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I'm sure you are still reeling, as I am, from the horrific events that happened this past Friday in a Connecticut elementary school, when a man opened fire, killing twenty innocent children and two staff members. This event sent shock waves all over our country. In this Christmas season with its focus on baby Jesus and children it feels especially tragic. I can't fathom the depth of heartbreak in the lives of the victim's loved ones. It's time to pour out our hearts and our prayers to God for all whom this tragedy has touched, including the family of the deranged gunman.

Theological questions always loom large in such horrific circumstances. Where was God? Why did God let this happen? My faith and understanding of God, teach me that God was not responsible for what happened. Stories in scripture attest to the fact that God has given humankind free will to make choices, for good or for ill. I believe that our loving, compassionate God was and is at this very moment weeping with the victim's loved ones and holding them close. And evil is very much alive in our universe and will be until our conquering Christ comes again.

As Christians walking the Advent journey, this is a critical moment to look up from the darkness that right now threatens to envelop us, and seek the light. Look for the lights on our Advent wreath. The first candle, reminds us that no matter what happens in our world, God is always a God of HOPE for the future.

Look for the light of the second candle, burning brightly too, reminding us that even in a warring broken world, God is a God of PEACE. God's only Son, Jesus, was called the Prince of Peace. He taught his hearers, and through scripture continues to teach us, about a kind of peace that goes far beyond human understanding. It's more than the absence of war. It begins with you and me. That's why we pass the peace of Christ to one another each Sunday in worship. It goes far deeper than a casual "hello, how are you?"

Today the George family lit a very special candle . It stands out from all the

rest because of its pink color. It's the candle of LOVE. Love was God's greatest gift to humankind, incarnate in God's only Son, Jesus. It's color lightens just a little, the more somber purple color of the darkness of Advent. It reminds us that with all the hatred in our world, God's love ultimately prevails. It's the message of God's amazing unconditional love that we carry into the world this Advent season. The candle of Love reminds us that in the face of our recent national tragedy, the words "what the world needs now is love..." are what we need to hear and act upon.

Today's lectionary readings speak right into our situation. Even in our high tech twenty first century world, the voices of Old Testament prophets still ring true. They continue to be light bearers to people who walk in darkness in every generation. They, like we, were not immune to the evil forces of this world. They knew profound suffering, despair, how the darkness threatened to devour and destroy their people. Yet, they were so tuned into God they could find light even in the deepest darkness.

Zephaniah's people lived through a terrible Babylonian invasion when their brightest and best people were abducted from their homes and hauled off to live in exile in foreign lands. They were forced to live for decades in an alien culture which worshiped gods other than their own. Some of these gifted leaders were pressed into service by the alien government which had conquered them. As Zephaniah and his contemporary prophet, Jeremiah, reflected on these happenings, they concluded that this exile had been God's judgment on their people for their unfaithfulness.

Picture yourself as one of these people trapped in exile and listen to Zephaniah's prophetic words:

"Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. 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 festival."

Their merciful and gracious God had forgiven them and sent their enemies fleeing. It was time to be thankful and celebrate. Notice today's Advent theme of LOVE in this passage. "God will renew you in God's LOVE." And God does the

same for us, day after day, renewing and transforming us through God's love, as we struggle to be faithful in our world.

An earlier prophet whom we now know as First Isaiah had different stories to tell of God's love and deliverance from traumatic circumstances. There had been an epic flood from which God had saved a remnant of God's people. Later, when the Hebrew people lived in slavery in Egypt, God had provided an escape through God's chosen servant, Moses. Standing at the waters edge of the sea, awaiting certain death from the Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, God opened a path for them through the waters, allowing the Hebrews to pass, then closing the path as the pursuing army stepped out on it. The waves of the sea engulfed soldiers and chariots alike.

With such a history, the Hebrew people had every reason to trust that God would save them again and again. First Isaiah's words to his people give us hope as well:

“With joy you will draw water from the well of salvation.”

Isaiah's metaphor of God's love as a deep well lived as a powerful image in the collective memory of a desert people for whom water was often scarce, and, therefore, among the most precious of treasures. God's activity that keeps replenishing that deep well of living water is named by today's candle, LOVE.

The power of Isaiah's ringing words in his own time was that they spoke to the collective memory of his people. They all knew the stories. They knew that their God, among the many gods of their neighbors, was the God who acted. ***For Israel's God, love was a verb.*** Love described God's action. God noticed the plight of the people and then found ways to enter the shadows of human history and take action in their behalf. Isaiah was right. The ***wells of salvation*** were overflowing with memories of ways God had put love into action. He knew to his own depths how God's people would respond as they recalled the cherished memories that filled that deep well of God's love. Listen again to Isaiah's words.

“And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.”

Isaiah's words are still powerful for us. God's Spirit draws us to this same well of living memory. And the well is deeper and more full than ever. Unlike the prophets of old, we have shared memory from beyond Christmas and Easter including the stories of Jesus, whose birth we are about to celebrate again. He came centuries after Isaiah's and Zechariah's time. Our shared memory stretches two millennia further, through the life of the Christian community since the birth of Jesus. More immediately, it includes the faith story of this congregation over the last 175 years. And it includes the faith stories that each of us could tell one another about God's faithfulness in our lives.

From our perspective beyond Christmas and Easter, we know what Zephaniah and Isaiah could only have dreamed about and longed for in their time. God was not done giving birth to the fullness of Love. This promise, not yet fulfilled, is foreshadowed in the "hard to listen to" words of John the Baptizer in today's gospel reading.

"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

For John, any response to God's love would always be measured in action. When he exhorted his hearers to repent, turn around, change direction, he expected them to change how they lived; to learn to actively love God's people as God had done again and again. Listen again to his dialogue with his listeners, and you will hear what I mean.

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."

So, John's question to us today would be this one. What will you do this week to help shape a world that can be more just and more caring than the world reflected in the events of the past week? How will you act out your love as disciples of Jesus this week? In the spirit of John's words, will you share your coat, your pantry, with those who need them most? Will you bring items to support our youth group's mission projects of collecting toys and gifts for needy families? Will you make a phone call or a visit to someone who is lonely, and perhaps confined this season? John had the right idea. For us, as for God, *love is an action word, a verb.*

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, may we remember that love took human form in God's only child, Jesus, who, through scripture and prayer, shows us each day how to live that love into the world's darkness.

Thanks be to God! Amen.