

I know I am speaking to some very bright people – so you may have already guessed that my name is Zephaniah – one of those prophet dudes who afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted.

Boy, did I have a tough time as a kid with a name like Zephaniah. . . a Hebrew word meaning “Yahweh has stored” an appropriate moniker for me because my prophesy consisted of me first collecting oracles or sermons preached in Jerusalem around 620 B.C. -- which I then shared with all those exiled in Babylon --- encouraging them – speaking tenderly to them -----uplifting them in HOPE!

Now before I proceed with my own particular story – it may help to put all of your 1st Readings from Advent in a historical context – because these four readings – 3 of which you have already heard – span about 150 years. . . so it would be like telling the story of your country from the end of the Civil War until the present time --- a lot can happen in 150 years!

Jeremiah, the first of your guest speakers -- was writing just as the Babylonian empire, which had conquered Israel and carried the Israelites off into slavery – was coming to an end – so around 600 BC. The Babylonian kingdom was beginning to come apart – so the light at the end of the tunnel was nearing ---

so Jeremiah was trying to whip the Israelites back into shape as the chosen people of God – for they had forgotten who they were during those long years of slavery.

Jeremiah’s task was to remind the people of Israel that no matter how far they strayed from God – God still loved them – and still wanted them to be his people.

Baruch was writing shortly after Jeremiah – after the Babylonian empire had collapsed – at which time some, but not all, of the Jews were returning to Jerusalem and their homeland.

Baruch’s task was to remind those Jews in the diaspora – of the dispersion or permanent exile – that even though they remained far from home – God still loved them – and continued to shower down blessings upon – each and every one of them – each and every day.

I, Zephaniah, am prophesying to God’s chosen people – BEFORE both Jeremiah and Baruch. My friend Micah, who will visit you next weekend – was writing even before me ---- so the important point to notice – is that these writings ARE NOT coming in chronological order – don’t blame that on me, blame that on the guys who put together your lectionary--- but there was a method to their madness. . . See they always try to pick a first reading – to connect somehow with the Gospel – not just in Advent, but throughout the year. So while the 1st readings are not in chronological order – the Gospel readings are---moving this Advent from the announcement of the Lord’s coming, through John the Baptist, through Mary’s visitation of her cousin Elizabeth – to the birth of your Savior.

So now that I have gotten that out of the way, and possibly confused you more than you wanted to be confused – on with my story. . .

So I was writing to the Israelites while they were enslaved in Babylon. Perhaps you have heard the saying – “it is always darkest before the dawn.” I think that is a saying which applies to my writing, brief though it is – only 3 chapters!

You see the longer the Israelites were enslaved and away from their homeland – the more discouraged they got. Because the work got harder and the days got longer. Their oppressors got harsher in their treatment of them. Food became more scarce, disease more rampant. Life more miserable.

And instead of all of these hardships driving them closer to the Lord – it drove them away from the Lord -----

which was an easy thing to do because the Babylonians would not let them publicly practice their Jewish faith anyway.

So they began to worship the pagan gods of the Babylonians – and worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars – instead of the God of their ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

So I was writing to remind them that no matter how bad things get, or seem – God is still in charge; no one – or no-thing – else. . . God is in charge – so they should remain faithful to the true God – rather than becoming unfaithful with the worship of false gods. . .

That’s why you hear me tell them in today’s reading that a time will come --- when the lord will “turn away your enemies.” That “the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst – you have no further misfortune to fear! On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! For the Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior!”

With those words, I tried to bring HOPE to those who had lost their hope. And I tried to bring JOY to those who thought they had nothing about which to rejoice.

Oh, if they had only listened to me – there would have been no need for Jeremiah to come along some 20 or 30 years later to whip them into shape!! Apparently not only does God’s people suffer from spiritual amnesia from time to time --- they are also quite deaf!!!

So, in your day, 150 years after your civil war --- I think there are still tensions among you --- between blacks and whites; between Christians, Muslims and Jews; between native born people and foreign born.

When innocent people get shot in your streets and in your shopping malls and movie theaters; when planes fall out of the sky – when sickness and disease strike unexpectedly, when you lose your job or have to take a cut in pay to keep your job, when your husband or wife abandons you and the children – when absolutely nothing seems to go right anymore--- then it becomes easy to want to blame someone --- and the more you blame, the more you begin to fear –and the more you begin to suspect, and mistrust; violence gives birth to hate and hate gives birth to violence and on it goes.

How easy it is for all of you to become discouraged, I would think; how easy to become pessimistic and cynical.

How easy to have all of these things drive you away from the Lord – rather than closer to him!

Heed, then, my thoughts and words: no matter how bad things get, or seem --- God is still in charge; no one – or no-thing – else. God is in charge – so remain faithful to the true God – rather than become unfaithful with the worship of false gods – however they come to you --- whether that is more weapons, more fear, more possessions – more drink, more drugs, more hate, more work . . .

Don’t turn a deaf ear to the wonderful good news you will hear over the next few weeks: a child will be born to you; a son will be given you: they name him wonder-counselor; God-hero; father-forever; prince of peace.

God is still in charge --- no one, or no-thing—else.

Pay attention to that prayer you hear every week right after the Our Father:

Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

God is still in charge---- no one, or no-thing else!

So what I would ask of you this coming week – as you continue on your journey to Bethlehem and the good news of the stable --- is to think about those things that give you hope in your life --- ponder upon those things that bring you joy.

And reflect – and recall – and remember – that no matter what ---- God is still in charge.

O Come, thou day-spring, come and cheer

Our spirits by thy drawing near.

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night.

And death's dark shadow put to flight.

Rejoice, Rejoice. Emmanuel. Shall come to thee o Israel. . .