

Zephaniah 3: 14-20 (pg. 877) "God Sings" Rev. Janet Chapman 12/16/18 (2<sup>nd</sup> Service)

What stands out to you in this text? Share a word or two that sticks out...  
Where can we enter this text? Where can we see ourselves in it?

Earth is in the balance, and many of our nation's leaders seem hell-bent on putting short-term gain ahead of the well-being of generations to come. We are mired in polarization in the public sphere which has infected conversations at the holiday table and on social media. Diversity is a call to division, rather than an invitation to learning. Yet, we are no different in spirit than Zephaniah and the people of this text.

In the Oscar nominated movie which was also a Pulitzer prize and Tony award winning play, "August: Osage County," a family is portrayed on the occasion of the father's funeral. Whereas some families rise to their best behavior during a crisis, this is not one of them as they sink deeper into dysfunction. The alcoholic father has committed suicide, the pill-addicted widow-mother is mean and manipulative. One of the daughters who seems happy and healthy is revealed to be in love with her cousin, who later turns out to be her half-brother; another is trying to hide a marital separation, and another is about to marry a pedophile. The granddaughter is stoned and promiscuous. They all smoke something, drink too much, and swear excessively. This context is the backdrop for the infamous line that playwright Tracy Letts spouts thru the unhappy adult daughter, "Thank God we can't know the future, or we'd never get out of bed." Grim resignation and corrosive fear have consumed this family just like Zephaniah's community who is steeped in human failure, disaster, shame, fraud and immorality. But thank God, Zephaniah knows something of God's future for the world.

The author's identity is unknown but we are told that family roots date back four generations which is very unusual for biblical prophets. If the original storyteller were a woman, than the one who recorded the text would have been male because men were the only ones to read or write. But that doesn't negate the fact that the prophecy could have come through a woman's words. The text reveals that the prophet dealt with the interplay of life and death, the collapse of the familiar social order, the dishonesty and incompetence of political leaders, and the impact of the machinations of hostile nations. Zephaniah's people knew national devastation and isolation from community and home.

The text locates itself during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, who is characterized as the last great king, whose only equal was the great King David. Zephaniah, however, witnesses another reality in the streets of Jerusalem. The prophet sets the stage for the major reform Josiah seeks to bring in 621 BCE.

Still, beyond the chaos, Zephaniah saw the birth of a new order which he/she puts to song. He/she encourages Zion, Israel, to sing as well. The hymn actually addresses female imagery and therefore belongs to the song tradition of women in the Hebrew Bible. It especially echoes women's songs in times of crisis and the celebration which offsets that crisis. Again, giving the impression that it could have been a woman who first shared these prophetic words. The promises within in the song show God reversing judgment and reclaiming the throne. We are offered hope and joy for God is not done with us or our histories. God has a vision of the future in which we are invited to join. The singing represented here is seen in many Hebrew texts, but this one is unique because a new singer is featured. Surprisingly, verse 17 tells us about a singer that is rarely depicted as such – who would that be? God. God sings about the celebration of the dawn of a new day, a day of restoration. The captives of Israel are to experience freedom; and the exiled are to find their way home. It is a song which has been sung for generations, just with different lyrics and tunes – consider such contemporary songs that do the same for us now – what current songs share the same message: Captives will experience freedom, the exiled will find their way home? (“We Shall Overcome”)

Phillip Phillips famous song, “Home” goes “Hold on, to me as we go  
As we roll down this unfamiliar road  
And although this wave is stringing us along  
Just know you're not alone  
'Cause I'm going to make this place your home  
Settle down, it'll all be clear  
Don't pay no mind to the demons  
They fill you with fear  
The trouble it might drag you down  
If you get lost, you can always be found  
Just know you're not alone  
'Cause I'm going to make this place your home.”

The prophet Zephaniah celebrates the joy of homecoming, and the celebration of a people's healing. Yet, this homecoming celebration involves the painful

awareness of what has been and the tragic losses that the exiled families have experienced. Past pain can't be denied, nor can our complicity in our nation's collapse be forgotten. There is hard work involved in this new day. Consider the phrase, "do not let your hands grow weak" – when or where have you seen this reality lived out?

As we ponder Zephaniah's celebration this morning, what in us needs to be healed and restored? Where do we need to hear the divine lullaby of reassurance or the divine shout of celebration? What promises will sustain us as we share in the hard work of personal and planetary transformation? Where do we find hope and joy in our current national story?

I want to close with a thought well worth pondering from French philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, "The day will come when, after harnessing space, winds, the tide, and gravitation, we shall harness, for God, the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire." Thanks be to God.