***CHRISTMAS PRAYERS: EASE OUR FEARS!***

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Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Luke 3:7-18

 Last week, before the arrival of our first granddaughter, I was talking with our son Daniel on the phone about Tally’s impending arrival. “Are you ready?” I asked him.

 “Well,” he replied, “physically I think we are ready. We have pretty much everything we need set up and Lucy has her bag packed to go when the time comes. Mentally, I *think* we are ready but I am not really sure. There is something called the epistemology of transformative experience that suggests there are certain events that change your perspective on the world. There are some things that are difficult to understand fully because you cannot ever step into the other person’s shoes and fully know what they know, like understanding what it is to be another race, though an event might open your eyes to see issues of race differently. There are certain experiences that transform the way you view the world, things that change your life and force you forever after to see things in a new light. I think the birth of a child is one of those transformative experiences that will change our outlook on the world. How I see things today will be different after Tally is born. So based upon that epistemology of transformative experience my perspective as to whether we are ready may be very different after she is born than it is now before she is born.”

 All I asked was, “Are you ready for the baby?” What I got was the epistemology of transformative experience, an answer that spoke not only to that day of expectant waiting, but to this day as well. Today Daniel sees the world differently as a dad than he did a week ago as a dad-to-be; he has a child who is now wholly dependent upon him and Lucy for her survival, a child for whom they bear responsibility this day and on into the future. Whether a child arrives by natural birth or c-section or the handoff in an adoption (as I have had the privilege of doing in my former career), new parents’ lives are forever changed. It is the wonder of birth that comes with great hope and great expectation and great responsibility; the world is forever changed. As Karen and I have learned, it changes not only for parents but for grandparents as well.

 Daniel was exactly right – that epistemology of transformative experience holds true across a host of lifetime events. The birth of a child, marriage, a sudden death, a dire diagnosis, a cataclysmic world event like 9/11 or the bombing of Pearl Harbor – such events forever alter our view of the world in which we live – some positively and some negatively. In this Advent season we are preparing to celebrate the birth of a child whose coming was a transformative event not only for his parents but for the whole world for generations and for generations to come. The event changes the world, but how it is changed is defined not only by the event, but also by our response to it.

 Last week a University of Pittsburgh football player named James Conner was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes. Conner was the ACC player of the year in 2014 and has missed all of this season with an injury that he has been working hard to rehab in hopes of playing next season. But last week’s news that he has cancer at age 20 changed his world. A football player who had already learned that he was not indestructible suddenly learned that he was also very mortal. In response to that grim diagnosis, Conner is quoted as saying, “I choose not to fear cancer. I choose to fight it. And I will win.” Faced with a diagnosis that would stir fear in even the bravest of souls, James Conner made a choice not to live in fear but to live with brave determination. He regarded fear as a choice that would define his future, and he chose a different path and a different future.

 In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of growing up in poverty in Baltimore. He writes of the systemic racism that constricted his life in many ways as a young African-American youth, but he also writes of fears that often dictated the life he lived and the responses of those around him – fear of others, fear of the unknown, fear of failure, fear of death, fear of ostracism. He writes of beatings by parents who were fearful of the consequences of the bad choices their son was making and knew no other way to convince him of the dangers. To his list we might add a host of fears that threaten to rear their ugly head along life’s way – fear of abandonment, fear of high expectations, fear of being wrong, fear of accountability for the choices we make. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks and the shootings in San Bernardino, we might add fear of terrorists in our midst that has provoked wild and irresponsible proposals that violate the foundational principles upon which our nation and faith is based.

 Some years ago Fred Rogers wrote a song for kids on his TV show asking, “What do you do with the mad that you feel when you feel so mad you could bite?” Perhaps our 21st century version of that song might be, “What do you do with the fear that you feel when you feel so afraid you could bite?” For, a lot of fearful folks are threatening to bite in a host of irresponsible and vindictive ways these days. James Conner chose not to be afraid. What do you choose?

 The prophet Zephaniah gave the people of Israel real reason to be afraid in the opening words of his prophecy:

*I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord. Merry Christmas!*

This hardly seems like a Christmas prophecy. Christmas prophecies are full of hope and rosy promises befitting the pink candle we light this third Sunday in Advent. Yet the prophecy of Zephaniah begins on this ominously low note: a frustrated God venting divine anger on the wayward ways of God’s people. It begins with a graphic description of the disaster about to come, words that will prove prophetic in the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon – life was going to get very ugly very soon.

 Were that the end of Zephaniah’s prophecy, we likely would not be hearing his voice this Advent season. For, there is little hope offered in the first chapters of Zephaniah. But as with other prophets, God offers a word of hope amid the doom and gloom of Zephaniah’s prophecy, a word from the Lord that held out a straw for the people to grasp in the face of impending disaster. It is that word we read today, that hope-filled promise of God for a faithful remnant, hope of a better day when the people would rejoice and be at peace and life would be good again and they would no longer be afraid.

“Sing aloud, O daughter, Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!...The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.” How strange those words must have sounded to the people to whom Zephaniah spoke of a cosmic collapse! Death, destruction, suffering, persecution – yet hope and joy! It is the story of God’s people across the ages, for God’s people are not those who have somehow avoided suffering, heartache or persecution. They are those who have experienced those trials, yet endured. Whether facing oppression in Egypt or exile in Babylon, persecution at the hands of Rome or terrorist attacks at home; a Black Plague, an AIDS epidemic or an Ebola crisis; the death of a spouse, parent or child – the people of God have persevered in faith. And the faith that has sustained them through the centuries has at its heart this promise: “The Lord your God is in your midst!”

 God is in your midst! That is the promise of Christmas, the promise of Emmanuel who is God with us. Advent prophecies hold out the promise of God’s presence with us in flesh and blood – a promise fulfilled in Jesus’ birth. That is a remarkable promise – that God would come not only to us, but among us, with us, in our midst, a fragile child born into a fragile world fraught with peril. The expectation was that his coming would be a grand and glorious event – the messiah arriving with an army of angels in tow. John the Baptist did little to discourage that impression with his warning of one coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, with his winnowing fork in hand waiting to clear out the chaff. I sometimes wonder whether John fully understood who this was for whom he was preparing the way, whether he knew what good news Jesus would bring or whether he expected, like so many others, a chariot of fire and the heavenly host. John knew the messiah was coming, knew for whom he was preparing the way, knew God was coming soon. But did he know how the messiah would come, how he would live, and how he would die? I suspect not.

 It is that possibility, that uncertainty perhaps, that makes this Advent story all the more relevant for us. For if John knew that God was coming, but knew not how, can we be any more sure? Can we really expect a literal descent from the clouds or might God come into our midst once again, as God did in Bethlehem on a silent night in a humble place on the fringes of society? Might God be in our midst, at our side, before we have time to prepare the way we really want to prepare for Christ’s return? That day will come like a thief in the night, we are told again and again. Until that day comes there will be a lot of things that will threaten us and try to make us afraid and encourage us to act out of fear in unfaithful ways. But we are called to be faithful despite our fears, to place our trust in God who bids us, “Do not be afraid!” What then will you choose – to be fearful or faithful or perhaps prayerful? Instead of acting out of fear, might we pray:

 *Lord, ease our fears. Reassure us of your presence with us. Give us strength to choose not to be fearful but to be faithful:*

*to love as you call us to love and*

*to live as you call us to live;*

*to forgive as you call us to forgive;*

*to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with you,*

*despite our fears.*

Might that be what we do with our fears in these tumultuous days? Turn them over to God who came into our midst as a vulnerable child, saying: Do not be afraid. I am with you! I am with you always to the end of the age. Amen