



A saying from about 1902 applies to today. You may have seen it on bumper stickers:

God comes to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

It actually was first used, according to the Dictionary of Christianese (yes, there really is such a dictionary), in describe the purpose of the press by journalist Peter Finley Dunne.¹ I asked a friend of mine who is a former print journalist, and he told me this quote was posted on the wall of the Memphis newspaper where

he had worked.

The saying got co-opted onto bumper stickers in the late 1980's and has come down to us today. It's a view of our calling by God, through John the Baptizer, to serve as God's hands and feet and conscience on this earth, especially with respect to those who are less fortunate than we are. It's a call to us to model Jesus as one who modeled a way of love for all.

We hear today several times over in our readings about "the day of the Lord." A day, meaning a time and not necessarily our 24 hour cycle, when we are to focus on what we are to do, how we are to live and to understand that the ground we walk upon is holy ground.

Zephaniah is a prophet who spends most of his writing about the doom and gloom – the judgment that is to come upon Israel for disregarding God's call on them to be a light to the world. The tiny fragment we read this morning is what is possible when we follow God's commandments. It is a time for rejoicing, a time for singing. A time to rejoice in the restoration of relationship.

Today we light 3 Advent Candles - two purple and one rose. So this is sometimes called Rose Sunday or Gaudete Sunday. A brief time taken from our waiting for Jesus to rejoice. A reminder perhaps that we should seek joy and celebrate even in trying times. It used to be that Advent was a penitential season like Lent with fasting and somberness. Today, perhaps in part because our secular culture is so present with us, Advent has lost most of its penitential aspects. But there are still vestiges in readings like today.

Whenever someone tells me that they don't like the God of the Hebrew Bible because that God is vengeful, angry, or wrathful- take your pick on negative words- I like to point them to Luke 3: 7-18. Here in the New Testament we have an image of God as one who will use an ax to cut down the trees (read humans) that do not bear good fruit. Or a God works in fire with a winnowing fork to clear the threshing floor and the chaff will be burned with an unquenchable fire. Sounds pretty much like a God that some believe is only in the Old Testament. And what is the good news- the gospel- that John proclaims in this passage? Unquenchable fire doesn't sound like good news, except in the sense that we have been warned of the consequences of behavior that doesn't comport with the faith we profess with our lips. Our lives are to mirror what we say.

¹ <https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/> (12/13/18)

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12: 2-6); Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

God is God whether we look for images in the Old Testament or the New. What can change is our image and our understanding of God, however. What any of us imagined God to be when we were age 6 is most likely different, if we are honest with ourselves, now that we are past age 18. And the image we have of God at age 18 is likely different now that we are over (pick your age). Our images and our understandings of God change as we change and there is nothing unbiblical about that. Our charge is to continue wrestling with Scripture for all of our lives. To see in Scripture how we should act as our circumstances change.

John the Baptizer is clear to those gathered around him waiting to be baptized and then inquiring of him about how to live once they have been baptized. We cannot claim safety by relying upon our ancestors. If all we do is claim that Abraham is our ancestor since Abraham was accounted as righteous before God because Abraham listened to God and did as God instructed, that is not enough. God can raise up new humans from the stones if necessary. God is not swayed by our reliance upon our ancestry. In each generation, we must make a decision about who we will follow. We must answer, as those gathered around Joshua did:

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:15)

“What then should we do?” asks the crowd before John the Baptizer. John is quite clear and foreshadows what Jesus will preach especially in the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus follows in the steps of older Biblical prophets like Zephaniah when he says what no one wants to hear, what no one wants to believe or points in directions that no one wants to look. Jesus cuts to the bottom line and eliminates all the clutter we put around reasons why we can't (read don't want to) follow what Jesus tells us to do and to be.

If you have sufficient clothing, give to those who do not. Have compassion on those in need. If you are in a job that offers plenty of opportunities for corruption and greed, do your job honestly and do not give in to temptation to take more than your pay. If you are in a position of power, do not abuse your power.

Compassion. Honesty. Integrity. These are the attributes that God expects and indeed demands from each of us. When we live according to the virtues and attributes expected of us, then God will turn our shame into praise and we shall be known as followers of Christ Jesus.

In the Bible, according to Angela Bauer-Levesque, promises do not come separated from judgment and suffering.² Biblical writers have not offered comfort to the comfortable. What the Biblical writers are doing, though, is to offer us the chance to be more clear-headed and to know what Jesus and John the Baptizer are telling us is the truth, the way and the life. We are offered in our lectionary readings each Sunday the opportunity to dig a bit deeper into God's Word and to respond to the question: what are we to do now with love and compassion while trusting in God's love for us.

² Angela Bauer-Levesque in Feasting on the Word Year C, vol. 1 2009 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 55

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12: 2-6); Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

In Travels With Charley,³ John Steinbeck tells the story of attending church in a small Vermont town. He tells of admiring the no-nonsense approach of the preacher on the reality of sin.

With a 'delivery like a pneumatic drill,' he gave a 'glorious fire-and-brimstone sermon' with a graphic description of a 'well-stoked, white-hot hell'. As the sermon progressed, Steinbeck began to 'feel good all over' reflecting that 'for some years now God has been a pal to us...*But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me.* He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it. For Steinbeck that preacher 'forged a religion designed to last, not predigested obsolescence.'

God cares about us- enough to warn us of the consequences of our self-absorption, our intentional disregard of what we are called to be and to do as followers of Jesus. We know what to do. Be compassionate. Be honest. Have integrity. Go and sin no more. Amen.

³ John Steinbeck. Travels With Charley (NY: The Viking Press, 1962) courtesy of *Synthesis*, Year C, Advent 3.