

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2024
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 7:18-35

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some people do not like good news. Whether we like it or not, the truth should be received as good news of sorts. To know the truth is better than being deceived. God is the ultimate truth, the ultimate Being, and the ultimate reality. This is good news because it is true. Man is not alone in the world, for God exists with us. The only way for us to know that we are not alone, to know that a personal God cares for us, is for God to reveal Himself in history. General revelation is the idea that God can be detected in the mysteries of the physical world. Experience the majesty of a sunrise, the intensity of a storm, the quiet breeze shuffling leaves overhead, and you might sense that something greater than yourself is present. But knowing that there is something more than matter is not the same thing as knowing who that something is. True knowledge of the one true God comes by way of revelation.

Man can seek God, much the same way a lost and scared child at a theme park frantically scrambles around and calls out for the missing parents. Success in the search, however, is dependent on the reality that God is in search of man. We often fail to perceive God. Left to our own wills, we would rather engage in idolatrous self-worship, ignorant of or obstinate to His merciful calls to us. God's revelation leaves sinful man demanding more; more proof, more miracles, more of whatever our insatiable flesh desires. God has not given up on us. In His search for man, God has revealed Himself through acting in history, through the prophets, and ultimately, through the incarnation of His Son. We know this because it is how we find Him revealed in the Bible.

God has revealed Himself in history through His actions. God acted in history when He called Abraham to be the father of His people. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the patriarchs of those whom God has chosen. Those descended from the historical line constitute the children of Israel who were eventually enslaved by Pharaoh and the Egyptians. God acted in history when He smote the Egyptians, exposed their gods as false, and liberated His people from captivity. We should not see this liberation as a one-time event long ago. The reality of the Exodus is still unfolding through the rituals and acts of God that emanate from it, namely through Passover, and the Eucharist, where rites allow for an experience of events. The reverberations of Passover can be heard and find their purpose and meaning in the words, "Take, eat, this is my body. Take, drink this is my blood."

At Sinai, God made a covenant with his redeemed people, revealing His word in clouds and thick darkness through His prophet, Moses. We, as Gentiles, are the

adopted sons and daughters of these historical reverberations, grafted in as wild olive branches. God's search for man has not ended. His actions in history continue to stand before us, testifying to the truth of His existence and Who He is.

God has also revealed Himself through the prophets. Naaman was a Gentile warrior under the King of Aram. But all the great achievements of Naaman were not going to cure him of a scaly skin condition. A young girl from Israel was taken captive as a slave to serve in Naaman's house. God would use this girl and Elisha in His search for man. She shared that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure Naaman's disease. When Naaman came to call on Elisha, the instructions he received were simple: "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."¹ This seems like it should have been taken as good news for Naaman, but some people do not like good news. Rather than trust in the word of the prophet, Naaman contested that the healing should have come through a grand gesture from Elisha. One of the servants with Naaman convinced him to give it a shot. "If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you 'Wash and be cleansed'!"² Naaman acquiesced, dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, and was cleansed. From that moment on, Naaman became a believer in the God of Israel. He even carried soil from the Holy Land back home with him, so that he could offer sacrifices to the Lord and no other gods.

God interceded in history through Elisha in order to heal Naaman. Naaman carried soil from Israel back to his home, but more importantly, he carried the name of the Lord to a foreign people. This was an evangelistic preparation of God's future work among the Gentiles through Christ and the church's mission.

Sometime later, failure to heed the Lord's revelation through the prophets left Israel in dire straits. The Lord had warned Israel to turn from their evil ways and observe His commands which He had delivered through the prophets. Instead, "They rejected His decrees and the covenant He had made with their fathers and the warnings He had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless."³ The Lord revealed His will through the prophets, and true to His word, He allowed the Assyrians to conquer the Northern Kingdom and disperse the population in exile throughout foreign lands. Shalmaneser resettled the land with Gentiles from other conquered lands. A form of unitarianism emerged as the people integrated worship of Israel's God with the ongoing worship of their native gods. The perversion of religion led to the scorn for Samaria which persisted into the time of Christ. The dispersion of the Jews is called the Diaspora of Israel, or the spreading of the seed. In a great mystery, God was using the punishment of Israel to spread the seed of His Word to foreign lands.

¹ 2 Kings 5:10.

² 2Kings 5:13.

³ 2 Kings 17:15.

Today, our reading focuses on John the prophet who served as the forerunner to the Messiah. His message of repentance and baptism was not always well received, even though it was good news: Wash in the Jordan and be cleansed of your sins. It was simple. But for many, it was viewed as unnecessary in light of their pedigree as Jews. Baptism for conversion was understood as being a rite for Gentiles, like our friend Naaman. It was simple enough, but it was rejected by those who saw no need for it. John's call to repentance through baptism was too good to be true, and yet, true it was. The rank sinners who knew obedience to the law was outside of their religious capacity flocked to John to wash in the Jordan. Through the prophet, God acted in history to call kings and thieves alike to repentance. And through John, God acted in history to reveal that the promise of the Messiah had come along with the restoration of Israel and creation itself.

At the appointed time, God revealed Himself in the incarnation of His Son. John first heralded the advent of Christ while they were both in the wombs of their mothers. Then, as an adult, John preached the good news proclaiming, "I baptize with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn the chaff."⁴ The apocalyptic language signaled that the Messiah would restore Israel and judge the unfaithful. And when John saw Jesus at His baptism, John declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.⁵ He went on to say that the whole reason he baptized anyone was to reveal the Messiah to Israel.

Despite the great optimism John had about the messiahship of Jesus, he found himself imprisoned and tended to by his own disciples. John's disciples wondered if their teacher might be the Messiah, and now, John, was wondering if his proclamations about Jesus were true. Faced with imprisonment and death, John was left wondering if he had led his own disciples astray. John sent his disciples to Jesus to ascertain the truth. Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth century church father, put it this way: "John sent them to Him, not wanting to interrogate Him, but rather that the Lord might confirm those former things that John had proclaimed to them... He sent them out in such a way that, having seen Jesus' miracles, they might be confirmed in their faith in Him."⁶ God's revelation to man was demonstrated through actions, but at times, the outcomes were mysterious. What can look like failure to man is divine success hidden in deep darkness. We are blessed if we do not fall away because our own flawed expectations were not met.

After answering the disciples of John, Jesus taught His own followers a valuable lesson. John was everything a prophet was expected to be. He was authentic. He lived by the values he proclaimed. A fierce non-conformist, he was a bit wild, and utterly

⁴ Luke 3:14-17.

⁵ John 1:29.

⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Volume 3*, Ed. Arthur A. Just Jr. (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. 2003), 120.

fearless. With intense boldness, John spoke truth to power, truth to sinners, and truth to anyone who cared to listen. But some people don't want to hear the truth, no matter who is speaking. Jesus points out the fickle nature of so many people in His time, but it is still true today. There are those who refuse to be satisfied with any true message presented to them. They will not dance to happy tunes or mourn to bitter poetry. The loss of mystery, the inability to perceive how God works in history, leads to cynical rejection of everything, even the truth God reveals through His Word.

Christ's incarnation, His life, death, and resurrection, constitute the defining act of God in history. It is the act foretold by prophets for centuries, witnessed by disciples and skeptics alike, and continues to inspire faith in the God Who has always been in search of man. "The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community."⁷ The mystery of revelation is ongoing. Christ continues to create unity through the revelation that comes through His Word. We are bound to this mystery, bound to this truth, unified in history with the one true God Who was, and is, and is to come again.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Harper One: New York, 1986), 20.