



# First United Church of Oak Park

God With Us

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

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Last Sunday, a very disturbing incident occurred at the First Congregational Church of Downers Grove. Early in the service, two individuals stood up and briefly took over the service. They lambasted the congregation for its open and affirming embrace of LGBTQ persons, and they predicted that those supporting such a stance would receive the full brunt of God's judgment. The pastor handled the situation calmly and expeditiously, and the individuals were quickly removed from the service. The leadership has since worked with their worship hospitality team and the police to determine how best to handle future disruptions, should they occur.

I share this information with you for three reasons. First, because we as a congregation stand in solidarity with the First Congregational Church of Downers Grove and we share their open and affirming perspective. I feel confident that I speak for our church leadership in assuring you that we are not going to waver in our commitment to openness, inclusivity, and affirmation.

Second, I relate this incident because we want to be heads-up about the possibility of a similar situation occurring here. The worship hospitality team, staff, and council leadership take this seriously and we will do our best to handle any troubling situation quickly and appropriately. The well-being of our congregation and visitors, as well as our integrity as a congregation, are of the utmost importance to us, and we will do all we can to safeguard you and this church.

Third, I mention this because it pertains directly to the text before us this morning. I want to talk with you about this text and our current challenges; but, before I do, I need to step back and do a little bit of background.

The prophet Zephaniah directs his message to the nation of Judah, which is generally the southern part of the nation that is now Israel. Judah is a tiny little country, wedged in between two super powers of its day, one to its north and another to its south, and it is forever being bullied and shamed by one or the other of them. Judah's kings spend considerable effort to curry political favor with the big powers, and Judah is quite often in a precarious position. Its people feel not only endangered, but also belittled.

The import of Zephaniah's political message to these folks is, if I might borrow a phrase from modern political discourse, "God is going to make Judah great again." I guess this is a political message that does not grow old with time; 2600 years after Zephaniah this same message is working for Vladimir Putin in Russia; it is working for those supporting Brexit in the UK; it is working here at home, at least among some people. And, it is certainly a word of good news in the seventh century BC. The political good news that God is going to make Judah great again resonates with the people's deep longing to be safe, to be independent, to be respected.

But in what does greatness consist? That's the question, isn't it? Zephaniah references grand stuff, like warriors and victory, which we might expect, but he also speaks of other realities that might surprise us or his ancient audience.

For example, Zephaniah speaks of inclusivity when he talks of Judah's future greatness and his list includes people who are sometimes cast aside or forgotten. Listen again to what he says in vs. 19-20:

I will deliver the lame; I will gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise.  
At that time I will bring all of you back.

Or, as our pew Bible translation says, "I will bring you home."

This word of hope is spoken to people who have been pushed to the margins by others, those who have been edged out of opportunity by people who want to hold on to privilege. This word of hope is spoken to anybody who has ever been ostracized because of the way they walk, or talk, or think, or act. It is spoken to anybody who has been denied opportunity because of who they are: the color of their skin, the shape of their eyes, the texture of their hair. It is spoken to anybody who has ever been pushed aside because of whom they love, or what clothes they wear, or how they wish to identify themselves. These are the children whom God is calling home. God is calling them home without reproach, and without shame.

God calls you home, each and every one of you, without reproach and without shame.

This is greatness for Zephaniah, that those on the margins will be brought home.

Zephaniah's second dimension of greatness is rooted in God's presence. "God is in your midst," he proclaims. God is with you, with us. This is the great good news of this text, the great good news of Christmas. Emmanuel, God is with us. That's where the joy comes from in this text; it emerges from God's delight at being able to restore and redeem and bring the broken and outcast home; it bubbles up from how happy it makes God just to hang around with the likes of you and me. This is greatness.

Do not fear, says Zephaniah, and don't give up. This joyful God is in your midst (Zeph 3:17, pronouns modified by the preacher).

She will create calm with her love,  
She will rejoice over you with singing.

We live in a broken and fearful world. We treat each other badly; we hoard compassion and privilege. Even when we are doing better on that front - when we are as generous and kind as is humanly possible - even then, there is so much that weighs us down, and much that frightens us. Yet, we need not fear for we are not alone. We have each other, and God is in our midst.

This congregation and its members are going to stand strong in support of openness, inclusion, and the welcome of all God's children. Sometimes that will stretch us, because that sort of openness demands that we welcome all, regardless of their ideology or lifestyle or abilities. But we will stretch and challenge ourselves to be the radically hospitable place we believe God calls us to be. And we will safeguard one another in the process. All are welcome here, without reproach and without shame.

We stand in this place, knowing that a joyful God, Emmanuel, is in our midst. From that good news we draw strength and comfort.

This God brings us peace.

This God welcomes us home.

This God loves us, just the way we are.

Amen.