

“Before Your Eyes”
Zephaniah 3:14-20
12/13/09

Rejoice in the Lord always because God is in your midst. Do not fear, the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. God will rejoice over you with gladness and will renew you in His love.

Thursday morning I was up early, and as I started up the road in my frozen car, the wind howling, I decided to drive thru McDonald’s to get some coffee. They have some good coffee, so I thought it’d be nice to have some warmth with me as I drove to the church.

They of course have their festive cups out now. This one says, “Have a cup of cheer.”

On the other side it says, “It’s the magic of the season—when the colder weather is no match for the warmth of a McCafe` coffee...I’m lovin’ it.”

Well, I can say that I’m pretty sure this little cup is no match for 18 degrees and 40 mph winds. This McCafe` would be McIce is no time.

But wouldn’t that be great? The magic of the season. Just “Have a cup of cheer” and all is well. In a couple sips your cold blues are turned into warm bliss.

Isn’t that what we’re looking for? Something, somehow in all this “Holiday Cheer” that surrounds us it will magically take away our sin and all the guilt and shame that comes along with it.

We had a church staff meeting this past Monday, and Jon Keller shared with us something he heard on the radio on the way into the church that morning. It was the “Santa God”—Santa was on the radio inviting children to call in and confess their sin so they can be forgiven.

Here’s how it went:

“Children, if you need forgiveness we have Santa Claus here for you today.

“Kids if you have been naughty this year and are on Santa's naughty list, all you need to do is call in and confess to Santa what you did wrong, and Santa will forgive you and put you back on the nice list!”

(Jon said to us: “During these conversations I thought to myself, if Santa is all knowing, why did he need to ask the kids what they did wrong? Why did he not just ask them why they did whatever it was that they did?”)

Anyway, here are three conversations with kids...

One boy called in and confessed to spitting in his mother's face. Santa forgave him, put him back on the nice list and told him he needed to continue to be nice to his mother if he wanted to stay on the nice list.

A girl called in and confessed fighting with her brother. Santa told the girl that he already knew everything, and ask her “what else she had done... that there was something else that she needed to tell Santa.” By the sound of her troubled voice, the little girl obviously did not know what Santa was talking about. Santa finally backed out of this conversation by saying, “that's okay, I know what it is, and I will forgive you and put you back on the nice list.”

One mother was obviously making her child call Santa and confess. You could hear the child crying in the background... “I don't want to talk to Santa... I don't want to talk Santa!” The call ended abruptly with either the mother or the child hanging up.

Can you say “scary”? I mean, perhaps there were good intentions going on here, but there are so many things wrong with this picture that I can't begin to get into it all this morning. And I am not one to do too many “Santa vs. God” sermons, although I probably should more.

But this one deserves a little attention, because you can stand this [McDonald's] cup up beside “Santa God” and they are basically telling you the same thing: We know you have some things wrong in your life, so here's the magic to get rid of it.

Whether it's taking a sip of cheer, calling in to Santa, or whatever else we seek out, we want to know that there is something or someone that will give us forgiveness, that will make us feel better, that will somehow turn things around. Something in all this holiday hoopla must be able to help us.

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20

“I will change their shame into praise.”

God will change your shame into praise.

No magic about it. God rejoices over you with gladness. He will bring you home.

We hear the words from the prophet Zephaniah, God's word to His people, Israel, that, although they stand in judgment from really messing up things in their lives and with God, there is reason to rejoice, to sing aloud.

For generations God's people lived in exile, the shame of separation from their home. But now God says: *“The Lord, your God, is in your midst.”* Yes, and He is going to do some pretty great things.

He is not like the powerless gods of the peoples around them. There is no magic and smoke of a false security. The one true living God has come and is going to restore them to wholeness.

Yes, that is our message—that is Christmas. God has come. And His promise is that, through what this child Messiah, Jesus, has done, our shame is changed into praise. Disgraced no more. No more reason to hide behind the smoke and mirrors.

Fred Craddock is a very well-known preacher who reminds us of an old movie, *The High and the Mighty*, which I must confess I have not seen. Craddock describes one scene where, on a flight over the ocean the pilot's voice announces to the cabin, “There is a problem. We cannot correct it. We are not going to make it. I tell you this so that you might prepare yourselves for the inevitable.”

An elegantly dressed woman begins to remove the diamond brooch from her neck. The large ring from her finger. She peels off her false eyelashes, wipes the makeup from her face. A large scar is now visible on her forehead that the makeup had always concealed. She is preparing herself for the end. She will go there as she really is.

As it turns out, the flight is saved. They make it to the airport. But the woman has changed. Honesty was offered to her and she took it, gladly. She took off the mask, and she became who she really was.

That is what Jesus' birth is all about. When we think of Christmas, as we are now immersed within it, we think of “dressing up” for the holidays, putting on our best smile, making sure we have the right kind of holiday cheer appropriate for Christmas. And I

hope you do have joy in your lives. But you know what I mean. So often in life we walk around wearing the mask of anger or overindulgence to cover our interior pain, with the makeup of indifference to cover the scars life has given us, with the nice clothes of false confidence to cover the shame and guilt that hides underneath. Wear enough tinsel around your neck and maybe that will distract everyone from the huge blotch on your forehead.

Shouldn't Christmas really be about "dressing down", about being ourselves, about coming clean with all this stuff going on within us? Isn't it time to take off the mask and become who you really are?

Sometimes, we know, the world doesn't want to let us forget either.

In Attalla, Alabama, a judge ordered two shoplifters to stand at a Wal-Mart entrance for eight hours, wearing signs that read, "I am a thief. I stole from Wal-Mart." "Maybe they'll think twice about doing it," declared the store manager.

Associated Press, "Judge Orders Shoplifters to Wear 'I'm a Thief' Signs"; dailymail.co.uk (5-7-07); submitted by David Slagle, Atlanta, Georgia

Whether it's your own mask you wear, or the sign you carry around from the world, God has a different purpose for you. God is real. His love is real. His forgiveness is real. You can absolute trust Him to be real yourself.

Jesus removes masks.

As a baby in a manger, Jesus removed the label from the people in the fields as being common shepherds to ecstatic messengers of God. The Magi, men of respect from the East who came to see Jesus, were humbled before Him as they presented their gifts in worship.

Jesus removes masks. Some of Jesus' first words as He began His ministry were similar to what we have heard John the Baptist proclaiming to us this Advent, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" Turn away from the sin in your life. Let God shine through the layers of stuff in your life that cover over who you really are—His child.

Jesus removes masks. "*Don't pray like the hypocrites,*" Jesus said, "*who love to pray in front of everyone for all to see. They have received their reward.*" No, Jesus says go into the closet and pray in secret, just you and God, alone with nothing standing between you.

Jesus removes masks. He healed many who were outcasts, removing from them the shame they carried and brought them back into the community. His disciples learned that with Him there was no place for squabbling over who was better or had certain rights to special privileges. Jesus said that if you want to hide in your life and save it you will lose it, but if you lose it for His sake you will find it. In Him you will find what is real, what is eternal.

Within the traditions and decorations of holiday cheer I think sometimes the cosmic, radical significance that little Baby lying in a manger has for us can get lost, or at least diluted.

God is coming! You can change. It is time to allow God to make a transformation in your life and "restore your fortunes before your eyes."

"God is in your midst,"

said the prophet Zephaniah. "*Great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel,*" said the prophet Isaiah. "*The Lord is near,*" Paul reminded the believers in the Philippian church.

“God will change your shame into praise.” What an awesome image that is!

God will take all the reasons you want to hide yourself, all the reasons your joy is silenced, all the junk and grime that covers you over and builds the walls around who you really are, and will take it all away so that you can stand clean within His presence and shout for joy.

How?

Allow God to open you up. Be honest before Him. Ask Jesus to enter into your life. Do that now and all through this Advent. No, there is no reason to fear it. And unlike any forceful parent calling Santa Claus, no one will force you into it.

Isaiah 12:3 says, *“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”* Yes! And God’s well will never run dry. Jesus Christ is the Living Water who quenches all thirst for meaning and joy. His is the Water that purifies and cleanses all sin and shame.

God rejoices over you.

When was the last time you really heard these words? *“God will exult over you with loud singing.”* Guess what? GOD IS GLAD THAT YOU ARE ALIVE!! Do you know that and believe that? God is happy, God rejoices that you are here. That is the whole reason His only Son, Jesus, was born in this world, because He loves you so much that He can’t stand that anything would come between you and Him. Not our sin, not our shame, not our insecurities and subsequent masks we wear. God wants none of that.

You probably know the image of a master of tricks standing before the audience ready to perform his best and most dazzling illusion to wow the crowd. What are his words to let you know something great is coming? *“And now, right before your very eyes...”*

Well, God has spoken. God has let us know something great is coming. *“I will restore your fortunes before your eyes,” says the Lord.* This is no illusion. This is no trick to wow us. No, God has done it. And it is real. He is right before your eyes. Are you ready to join Him? Amen.