

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 12, 2021

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 | ISAIAH 12:2-6 | PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 | LUKE 3:7-

18

The Emily Post Institute is a sort of etiquette think tank. Think of it like the Heritage Foundation except instead of publishing white papers on infrastructure policy, they provide guidance on how to address envelopes, choose flowers, and dress for an informal/black tie wedding.¹

One of the resources they provide are “sample scripts.” Language that you can use to navigate etiquette questions. Office mate wearing too much cologne? There’s a sample script. Houseguests won’t leave? Sample script. Funeral of someone you didn’t know? Sample script. Even if you aren’t an etiquette wonk, you can see the appeal. Sometimes it can be nice to borrow someone else’s language.

That’s what today’s reading from Isaiah is all about. This is written during a time when life feels unstable. The people are living in diaspora. They are uncertain what the future holds for them. Will they get to go home? Will the Temple be rebuilt? Do they have a future as a people? Or should they get used to things being the way they are?

The prophet’s answer is that things will get better. God “will raise a signal for the nations, / and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, / and gather the dispersed of Judah / from the four corners of the earth.” So there’s a promise of renewal and restoration. So far, so good. But there’s something else going on here, too.

The prophet says that on that day, “You will say... Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.” The important part of that is *You will say*. God doesn’t just make a promise about the future, but God gives people language that they can use to respond. It’s almost like a sample script.

This is noteworthy for a couple reasons. One is just that God offers us language to both articulate and shape our experience. We often think that for language to be powerful, for it to be meaningful, it has to be our own. When someone says they don’t have the words, we advise, “Just speak from the heart.” And we do. We write our own vows at weddings. We insist on giving funeral eulogies without notes. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t.

But there are times when we don’t have words. There are times when life hits you in the face and leaves you speechless. If we don’t know what we’re supposed to say, God and our community of faith gives us words. And those words are just as good as the ones that come from in our hearts.

¹ Not a hypothetical.

Sometimes the most important words aren't the ones we come up with ourselves but the ones that get handed down to us already broken in. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* They don't simply express ideas beyond our grasp, but they remind us that we aren't the first people to experience the joys and burdens of life. There is grace in inhabiting the language of others.

And second, God invites people to take on language that doesn't describe their current situation. You could imagine the prophet saying, *Someday God will make everything right. And we'll give you some language to use when that happens. Let'.* But the prophet says that the people are going to learn the language of thanksgiving now. When it doesn't come naturally. When it doesn't describe what's going on. For the prophet, language isn't simply descriptive. It's constitutive. It builds reality by expanding our imagination for ourselves and empathy for others. So even when you don't feel joyful or hopeful or inspired, there is power in retaining its vocabulary.

We heard another example of that in today's reading from Philippians. St. Paul is in prison. Things aren't looking great. They're probably going to get worse. And he writes to this church in Philippi and says what? "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Does St. Paul want the people to rejoice because he's in prison? No. Of course not. Do these people have cause to rejoice right now? Not really. But they people should rejoice because Christ is near. So even if you don't feel joyful now, you need to keep that language. You need to practice inhabiting words and practices that don't reflect your immediate experience. It's not whistling past the graveyard as much as it is not forgetting how to whistle. God gives us words not simply to describe our own experience, but to expand our imagination and depth of life.

That's all pretty straightforward. So here's the fun bank shot of this idea. And this ends up being particularly useful for the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season. We aren't just invited to use words of joy and thanksgiving when we're not feeling particularly joyful or in the mood for giving thanks. But the opposite is true, too. In times when we're feeling joyful and hopeful and feel like the day of the Lord is near, we are invited to practice using the language of people who don't feel that way. We use the language of lament and petition.

This might sound like a new idea, but this is part of our Advent practice. Think about some of the hymns we sing this season such as "Lost in the Night," "As Dark Awaits the Dawn," "Come Now, O Prince of Peace," "Each Winter As the Year Grows Older," and "Comfort, Comfort Now My People." What do they have in common? They're basically hymns of lament. If you take out the references to candles and winter, you could easily put those in the lament section of our hymnal. They give us a vocabulary to describe our grief caused by the world's public injustices and our own private losses.

That might not connect with our personal experience. We may not feel like we are “vainly awaiting the morrow.”² Or that the “verities that we knew seem shaken and untrue.”³ Or that we “sit in darkness mourning under sorrows load.”⁴ But many of God’s people do. And that language gives us not simply an awareness of that experience but draws us into greater solidarity with those Christ comes to first. To use the language of the prayer of the day, we “open our ears” to the plight of the suffering and marginalized not simply by listening to their experience but by singing their words.

This “taking on” of other’s words, entering into their experiences of life, is what the incarnation is all about. In Christ, God takes on our gains and losses, our life and death, our words and silence. Christ takes on an experience which is not his own and brings it into the very heart of God. Christ celebrates our joys, prays our petitions, and laments our losses. When the Word becomes flesh, the flesh of God takes on our words.

So even when we get to a place where we feel like we don’t have words, Christ still speaks through us, prays with us, and carries our voices. Even when we can’t shout or sing or even speak God’s praises, the Word of God remains among us.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² “Lost in the Night”

³ “Each Winter As the Year Grows Older”

⁴ “Comfort, Comfort Now My People”