

“Responding to God with Us” based on Zephaniah 8-20 and Philippians 4:1-8

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on December 12, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

This past week we discovered that a small cat has been living underneath our back deck. I had seen the cat a week or two earlier, and really thought nothing of it. There are several strays and neighborhood outdoor cats that come in our yard all the time. But then Claire saw the cat go underneath the deck and come out again.

When the cat met us, it was clear that life on her own, wasn't working. She was skinny, her bones were visible through her black fur. And so, we did what anyone with a heart would do: We fed her and have been feeding her since. It's amazing how fast she fattened up in just a few days of being fed three times a day.

Here's a fun fact: biologists have discovered that the species known as the house cat today, split from wild cats long before domestic dogs made their genetic break from wolves. Yet, archaeology shows evidence of domestic dogs well before evidence of domestic cats. What some scientists and historians believe this shows us, is that humans did not choose to domesticate cats, but instead, the cats adopted humans as their protectors and providers.

This is certainly true in our case, as this small cat, has now claimed a space in our hearts, and we are now her providers and protectors. Her purrs and affection reveal this. Proof of our new roles came on Friday night, when I came home from the wedding rehearsal, and there was Shadow, as Harrison named her, waiting on our back deck for me. I went inside and got some cat food and I brought it out. I sat next to Shadow as she ate her food and afterward, I petted her. During this, she suddenly started to growl and hiss at another cat. So, I picked up a small stick and threw it to chase that other cat away.

Now, this is where it had me thinking about today's readings from Philippians and Zephaniah. There I was, dealing with Shadow's oppressor, chasing it away, while present with her. In that moment, I became like God to her, with her, and she had no reason to fear. Yet, she continued to growl and hiss at the other cat who was long gone. If the Apostle Paul were another cat and there to converse with her, he might have said, 'Meow, meow, breoww, meow...' I mean he might have said, 'The Lord is near, be anxious in nothing,' just as he said to the church in ancient Philippi.

Now there are problems with this analogy, not the least of which is my lack of divine power. After all, once she had settled down, I went inside again and was not near to her. It takes effort to keep checking on her and chasing strays away. She is not safe. Likewise, the analogy breaks down, in that she initiated our relationship, whereas in our relationship with God, it is God who pursues us. However, we will take her Monday to get her vaccinated, then we hope to have her inside and safe for sure, adopted as a member of the Mangione family. She is dependent on us being with her, and we are committed to her.

Friends, this is what the Apostle Paul is telling the Philippians and is still telling us today. You see, if the good news is God's presence with us, if it is in fact 'Emmanuel,' then we can

'Rejoice,' indeed we can, 'Rejoice always in the Lord.' If we believe this, our duty is not to keep growling at what threatens us, but to trust in the presence of our protector and provider.

In the Greek it says to let our '*epieikes*' be made known. This word is often translated as 'gentleness,' but literally means, 'around (or fitting) equity (fairness),' and it is used to mean, mildness and forbearance, a willingness to yield, and give justice to others, without fear of what we might give up.

This exhortation reminds us of what Paul says back in the second chapter of Philippians, when Paul tells the church to let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, a mind of humility, one which regards others needs before our own, just as Christ did. For Christ, despite being equal to and one with Israel's God, humbled himself to come down to us, to share in our humanity. He did this not for his needs, but to meet our need, as sinful humans. You see, a God in Trinity has no inherent need for us, yet still chose to create us to reflect God's image, with the power to create like God, the power to love like God, and the power to choose, like God, what to create, and what to love.

And so, Paul tells the Philippian church to support Euodia and Syntyche, two women, who may well have been the church's leaders, who had worked alongside of Paul, and alongside Clement, who was Peter's successor as Bishop of Rome. And here Paul uses language that he may have borrowed from Zephaniah, where a Greek translation rendered the Hebrew, '*with one shoulder,*' as '*under one yoke.*'

It is an image of Messiah-redeemed people, working together with pure lips, speaking of God's love. These people, these redeemed, are to rejoice, to be anxious in nothing, as hard as that is, and meet anxieties with prayer, petition and thanksgiving. Then Paul makes a promise: "The Peace of God, surpassing all understanding, WILL – yes, he promises it will – guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

You see, Paul is not saying the Christian is never anxious, or never struggles, but that God is with you, so turn to what is good, excellent and praiseworthy. What Paul expresses is in continuity with the promises made in the book of Zephaniah, which begins with great judgement on the world and also on God's own people, Israel, but which ultimately, returns to the faithful commitment of God to the people, not to ignore them or their sins, but to judge, convict and show mercy.

God takes away judgement, so that their enemies will be sent away, and they have no need to be ashamed of their past sins. The same goes for us – God's judgement is real, and so, our sins are not to be taken lightly, for sin creates damage, brings destruction, because it separates us from God, from the creator, who brings restoration. Judgement is not to destroy us, but to remove any who rejoice in pride, it is to humble us. Judgement is to keep us from declaring our superiority because we stand on God's holy mountain. Judgement is to make us poor and meek, to trust in the Lord our God, so that we might do no iniquity, but display mildness and forbearance. It is so that we shall not speak lies, but pray, give thanks and praise instead, and we will feed our flocks, share with those dependent on us, and make no one

afraid of us. This is what it says – make no one afraid – this is what it looks like, to be a people judged by the Messiah, what Zephaniah and Paul both tell us.

It's what the gospel lesson for today, which we didn't read, also says from John the Baptizer, who declares that the Messiah will separate the grain from the chaff and toss the chaff into the fire to be burned, so only the grain from one stalk of wheat may be stored. Thus judgement preserves from each stalk of wheat, only what will bring life, and destroys that which is waste, that which is impure.

Judgement for our sins is and should be a frightful notion, but it prepares us to fully know God's love for us. You see, one of the pillars of my faith, why I believe and why I preach to you each week up here, is how I cannot escape the continuity of scripture, and the way it exposes failure. It exposes the failure of those whom God first called, through the failure of Israel, and through the failures even of the first disciples and the apostles.

Scripture is more than just literature, it is truly revelation. I say this because literature speaks timeless truths to us, but revelation stands above us and shows us who we are against the backdrop of who God is. Scripture as revelation, promotes self-criticism and deconstruction of our environments. It promotes reform through repentance - turning back to God. Revelation is the source by which humanity knows God's judgement and God's love simultaneously – because we share in God's image and life.

In this Advent season, we await the coming of God with us, and celebrate the reality that God is already with us. We know we are beloved because God became a baby. Yes, the creator of all things became one of us, lived as we live, and died on a cross for us, only to rise again, so that we, lowly humans, might know our dignity in God, our belovedness as individuals and as a community.

We know this truth not as a point of pride, but to trust in our provider and protector, the one who refines us and stands behind us to deal with our oppressors, to be the Mighty One who causes our salvation, who saves the lame and outcast, gathering all who are struggling, appointing them for praise and prestige, in the presence of those who had previously put them down. By God's work alone, praise and prestige is given.

My sisters and brothers, you are God's beloved and your God is with you. Your God shared in your humanity through the Son, sent by the Father, to die and rise, making you a temple and sending the Spirit to be in you, and among all who have restored lips to speak of this One True God.

You have been called to share in Christ's work of reconciliation, to bring love and grace, the very gifts of God, to all, so that we might use our status as image bearers, to create as God creates, to love as God loves, and to create and love, as Jesus commanded, 'loving God with all that we have, and our neighbors as ourselves.'

I want to leave you with a story of what it means to be an image bearer to each other. I already told you what it might look like to a cat, so this is a human example. As you know

from previous sermons, I am a big fan of the show, 'The Chosen.' And so recently, I watched a speech given by the man who plays Jesus in it. His name is Jonathan Roumie, and he told a story of a fan, who came up to him while he and two show producers, were having breakfast in a restaurant in Utah.

The woman came to their table and asked tentatively, 'Excuse me, are you Jonathan Roumie?' He acknowledged who he was, and she fell down on her knees next to him, and with both hands, she clutched his arm with tears, mystified by his presence. Roumie said he was unable to speak, shocked by her intensity in that moment.

She kept saying, 'It's really you. You're really real. You're here.' He said that for a moment, he wasn't sure what was going on. He could tell that the woman has had a hard life, and so he asked her name, and after she told him, he said, 'Hi Jennifer, I'm Jonathan.' He thought he was making clear that he was not Jesus. She said she knew he was an actor, but when he said her name it touched her.

He said that as he said her name, she closed her eyes and buried her head in his shoulder. As she wept in his arms, he embraced her, and she clung to him as she would, he imagined, if Jesus himself were holding her. It seemed time had stopped. Jonathan said he could feel God's presence in the room assuring him, that all he needed to do was be present for her in that moment, knowing that God would use this opportunity, to give her some healing, or refreshment, not by Jonathan's own doing, but an act of God, by the Holy Spirit working in & through him.

Friends, Jonathan may be an actor, doing an incredible job playing Jesus in 'the Chosen,' but friends, this *epi-eikos*, this mildness and understanding, this bearing of her yoke, this humility and meekness, this gentle strength, awareness of God's presence. This is what we can and are called to be for one another, to bear God's image to others, not as actors from a TV show, but as people aware of God's presence with us, and by the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

To believe that God is with us is not to fear God's judgement or anything this world can do to us. And it is certainly not growl and hiss, with pride, dominance, and self-preservation. It is instead to be empowered knowing, 'The Lord is near, be anxious in nothing,' and then be present to others as the Spirit is present in and among us. We are to be an expression of love toward others as Father loves us, and in doing so, we join Jesus in his death and resurrection, turning back always in repentance to God, working with God in the ministry of reconciliation, and singing praise to the Lord, rejoicing, because you are the Lord's beloved, and the Lord, God of Israel, sings over you. Amen.