

Joyful AND TRIUMPHANT

Sermon, December 16, 2018

Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Revelation 5

The late Joseph Campbell, a professor of literature and the author of *The Power of Myth*, lectured widely on the book's topic until his retirement in 1972. At the end of his lectures he liked to tell this legend from India about a pregnant female tiger that was on the hunt. The tigress was desperate and starving, as she had not had a kill for some time, and she was also concerned for her unborn cub.

She came upon a herd of goats. She crept through the trees until she was in striking distance and then she pounced as much as her weakened state would allow. However, she was so debilitated from her condition that she died in mid leap, and then fell to the ground where the goats had been. In dying, she gave birth to a single cub.

The goats, who had scattered, regrouped around the scene and saw what had happened. Exercising their parenting instincts, the nanny goats took pity on the newborn cub and adopted it. Over the months, the goats raised the cub as one of their own kids (*and I used the term "kids" literally; these ARE goats*), and eventually it grew into a young adolescent tiger. However, it wasn't the best specimen of a tiger; since it thought it was a goat, it lived on the diet of a goat, and had all the habits and idiosyncrasies of a goat.

Then one day another hunting adult tiger, a healthy one, came upon the herd of goats. The tiger pounced, the goats scattered, but the younger tiger stayed put. Being a tiger and not a goat, he had no innate instinctive fear for tigers. The attacking tiger looked on this strange specimen in surprise. The young tiger was awkward and somewhat nervous, so he bent over to nibble on some grass.

"*WHAT are you?*" the older tiger growled. "*I'm a goat ... maaa!*" the young tiger bleated. The older tiger said, "*No, you're not. You're a TIGER. Why this masquerade?*" "*I'm a GOAT,*" the young tiger protested. "*Come with me,*" the older tiger commanded, and led him to a nearby pool of water. There the older tiger pressed the youngster to come alongside and they viewed their reflections in the pool. "*There,*" the older tiger said. "*Take a look. I'm a tiger. You look like me. You're a tiger, too.*" Well, the truth eventually became clear to the young tiger as he gazed upon their reflected images. He began instinctively lashing his tail, and digging his claws in the ground, and then the young beast raised his head high, and let rip with his very first roar, a roar that began as a squeaky howl but crescendoed louder and more resonant and resounding as he discovered and exercised his unused voice. Delighted that he helped this young tiger discover his identity, the older tiger then joined in with an exultant, reverberating roar of his own. And, the story goes, the jungle trembled at the exultant, resonating, resounding, joyful and triumphant song of the tigers.

And the older tiger said, "*See, you're a tiger. Now, stop living as a goat and go out and live as a tiger.*"

We have been made in the image of God. We are children of heaven. But day in and day out we keep hearing the false message communicated and echoed and reinforced that we are children of the earth, that we are little more than animals. But we are created to be so much more than animals driven and controlled by our goatish (*and often conflicting*) appetites. In our hearts we instinctively long for so much more, but we settle for pursuing nothing more than creature comforts. I'm reminded of what I think is my all time favorite Ann Landers letter: It seems this man was carrying on simultaneous affairs with three different women, and he wrote to the advice columnist: "*Until a few days ago, none of them knew the others existed and things were going fine. By chance two of them met each other, compared notes and found me out. Now they are furious with me. What am I going to do? Signed, Trapped.*" Ann Landers responded: "*Dear Trapped: One major thing separating the human race from animals is a God-given sense of morality. Since you obviously don't have that, I suggest you consult a veterinarian. Signed, Ann.*"

The calling of the church is not to help us cope with our life as a goat. Nor is the calling of the church simply to make us more content with our own piece of turf. Nor is the calling of the church to just dress all the goats up and herd us into pews. No, the church's calling is to help us discover our true identity, to remind us and keep reminding us who we are, who we were created to be, and to exhort us to stop living like animals and live as we were created to live! Worship is where we come back to get our identity with God straight. The message of Christmas is that the One the Bible calls the Lion of Judah (*and I know I'm mixing metaphors, with tigers and lions but no bears, oh my*), God in the flesh, Jesus, the perfect image of God and humanity combined in one Presence, entered this world to tell us goats that we are so much more than goats, that we are created in the divine Image; He came to redeem us from goat hood and to help us live as the children of the almighty God.

Worship opened today with the words of Zephaniah: "*Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*" The promise is, according to Zephaniah, that one day God will start singing. Loudly. The translation is a bit weak ... the Hebrew word translated "singing" is an intensive verb form; it depicts an **exultant** singing, which is the really-let-it-rip kind of singing. The exultant roar of the legendary tiger Savior and his redeemed young tiger shook the jungle; well, the Bible promises that one day the exultant and joyful singing of the Lion of Judah and His redeemed will shake the universe!

One of the most popular Christmas carols of all time is "*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.*" The original words of Charles Wesley, though, were "*Hark, how all the welkin rings! Glory to the King of Kings!*" "Welkin" is an archaic English word for "heavens" or "the universe." Charles Wesley never wrote that the angels sang, perhaps because he didn't overlook what other hymn writers seem to have overlooked: The Scripture does not say the angels sang at Jesus' birth. When the angels appeared to the shepherds with their message of "*Glory to God in the highest, etc.*", the text says they were *speaking*, not singing. In fact, (and I've pointed this out in past Christmases) there are only two times recorded in all of Scripture, two biblical references, about angels specifically singing. The first is Job 38:7, where God tells Job of the angels' singing at creation. That took place before the Fall, before Adam and Eve sinned. The next reference to angels singing is this prophetic passage all the way at the end of the Bible, Revelation 5, our text this morning. John saw many angels "... numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, etc.' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, **and all that is in them, singing...**" John sees in this divine vision that one day, after the Lion of Judah Who comes to us as the Lamb of God, once He completes His work of redemption and restoration, everybody and everything in all the created order is breaking out in exultant song!

So, the Bible tells us, the angels sang before the fall of man, before the grand harmony of God's good creation was shattered. And the angels will sing again, after God's redemption and restoration is complete ... and all the redeemed will be singing with them! In the meantime, though, it seems that the angels do NOT sing. Perhaps they find it hard to sing while things are still so "broken," perhaps this means they will not sing again until all is finally and fully restored, until all is made right. However, all the while the angels continue to minister and serve and obey and honor their God and Maker with the utter confidence and hope that all **will** be made right. The angels know the end of the story; they've read the back of the Book and know that it all turns out great! In the Bible, the future has already been written, and it's a wonderful ending! It ends with justice, with restoration of what is lost, with the healing of relationships between people and nations, with you and me joining the rest of creation in a grand mutual "A-Ha!" chorus of really and truly understanding and celebrating that "**God is good!**" Then and there, at the end of the "Book," at the end of HIS story, history, we will finally and fully understand how it all fit together.

In a nutshell, this is what the whole biblical drama of redemption is all about: A wonderful chorus, a huge cantata, that has been in preparation a lot longer than our choir has been preparing for the concert this evening ... a grand concert choir cantata of praise and joy and celebration is in the works and one day all redeemed creation now in restored eternal Harmony, as John sees it, all in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them.... will let it rip in a mighty chorus! And, according to Zephaniah, probably the biggest baritone bellowing out over them all will be God Himself, the Grand Tiger (*to again mix my metaphors*), Who will be singing over all of us with exultant joy and triumph! That's the joyful and triumphant closing chapter of the story of redemption ... a story which is really just a prologue to eternity, to life eternal and everlasting. It isn't here yet, but it sure is coming! It is coming because, as Isaiah saw in his prophetic vision in words we will read on Christmas Eve, "... unto us a Child has been born, unto us a Son has been given." In the meantime, we still live in the fallen-ness of this broken world. But, like the angels, we live and serve and obey and hope in optimistic confidence, knowing that "... of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this."

I mentioned in the children's message the story of a boy who came to church for the first time on Christmas. When his mother asked how he liked it, he said, "*It was fine, but I really want some of that umphant.*" His mystified mother replied, "*Umphant? What's that?*" The boy answered, "*Whatever it was all those people were singing about - 'O come all ye faithful, joyful and TRY UMPHANT.' I don't know what it is, but they seemed so happy that I'd really like to try some of that umphant for myself!*"

"See," the older tiger said, "*you're a tiger. Now, stop living as a goat and go out and live as a tiger.*" Let us go out and try some of that "umphant" ... in celebration of who we are created to be, in celebration of our redemption by the Lion of Judah, and in celebration and delightful anticipation of what is to come!