

It's been said that human nature is characterized by hiding, diversion and denial. There is good reason for this. Today's reading from Zephaniah describes the conditions in life that make people go into hiding, or seek out diversion, or stand fast in denial. In the text we read about all that afflicts the Israelites, all that afflicts you and me: judgment, enemies, evil, reproach, and shame. Some of this difficulty was caused by those who hated Israel, some of it was caused by their own wickedness.

The combination of the judgment of the world and the shame of our own sin is a lethal one. It makes people that flee into hiding, diversion and denial. The truth about ourselves is usually too painful to face head on and the slings and arrows of the world are too sharp and defeating.

So we go into hiding. We hide the truth about ourselves, we hide our real selves in any number of ways. Hiding began in the Garden of Eden, when Adam, ashamed of his sin, hid from the Lord. Hiding continues today, usually through carefully maintained images. Tiger Woods hid behind his image until a golf club came crashing down on it. You can hide behind anything. I'm guessing that a lot of people are hiding their own sin behind Tiger's sin. Tiger is a scapegoat. Let's talk about Tiger so we don't talk about me.

You can hide behind anything, even a minister's collar. The fear of being "found out" – exposed for who you really are is a common fear. It's listed as fear number 39 in the Fears/Phobias test of the top 100 common fears. Granted, in the list are also "fear of aliens" and "fear of electronic gadgets", but I'll wager that most of us here fear being "found out" in some way or another. And that sends us into hiding.

Diversion is another tactic to deal with the judgment, reproach and shame we encounter in the world and in ourselves. Well, you know the usual suspects that divert us. Golf is a biggie. Or shopping. Or the Dallas Cowboys. Or decorating your beach house. Or drink. Or Tiger Woods' choice of diversion, which given the powerful libidinal life of the average human being, is everyone's diversion.

For the younger generation, along with s-e-x, it's the internet. I was in Alderman Library a few weeks ago just watching people. Students come in to "study." This involves, getting a skinny non fat latte at the Greenberry's up in the lobby, then settling in a chair in proximity to someone extremely attractive, usually with a brightly but tastefully colored scarf.

Then out comes the Macbook. First to Facebook. Then out comes the iPhone. Then comes text messaging, web surfing and blogging. Then maybe out comes the history book, which is read for 15 minutes before a nice 45-minute nap. Then it's off to the Corner for some much needed relaxation after all that arduous study!

Children are a huge diversion. Children are the usual diversion for tension in marriage. While the children are present, husbands and wives can direct their attention on the children, diverting the pain, judgment, and lovelessness that exists between them. Or when young married couples go home for Christmas with little babies, you'll notice that the baby gets all the attention. Yes the baby is cute, but the baby is also the repository of all the unresolved conflict between the 20-30 something and his or her parents. Or step parents. Or In-Laws.

Hiding, Diversion, and then denial. Denial is the third of the Gorgon Sisters of human response to judgment, sin, and shame. As a friend likes to say, Denial is not just a river in Egypt. Denial says, "Hey -Everything's fine!" when everything is obviously not fine. Denial puts on a happy face. Southerners are especially adept at this kind of denial.

Christie and I came across a classic case of denial when we went into the Origins store Barracks Road store to buy a gift for a friend. We found a whole wall of creams and lotions categorized as "Age Correctors". Age Correctors! There were Age Preventers – I guess that is step 1. But when you've progressed past the help of Age Preventers, you must be a candidate for Age Correctors. We almost bought 2 ounce jar of Age Corrector for our friend, just for the name, but it was 50 bucks. That's 25 bucks per ounce of Age Corrector. Make no mistake, denial is expensive.

Denial is expensive because your real feelings will come out, they will have their day. If they don't come out in a sex scandal, they'll come out in alcoholism, or divorce, or a stroke. Denial is expensive; it could cost you your life.

Hiding, diversion and denial. Again – this is all understandable, given the experience of judgment that we feel from the world and from ourselves. We don't measure up. We cannot be known fully and yet loved fully. The real me, or the real story about my father or my child is too painful to face head on.

I'm guilty of all hiding, diversion and denial. Who wouldn't be? Judgment kills and defeats a person. Judgment can come in the form of so-called "advice." Any time a person says, "I'm just saying!" he is really not "just" saying. There is no such thing as "just saying". It's usually a judgment lobbed on to a person like a grenade.

In actual fact, no one can voluntarily come out of hiding, cease his diversion, or confront denial with honesty. A little boy was overheard praying in church. He knelt down and prayed, *"Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time as I am."*

But the truth is that hiding, diverting, denying is no way to really live. As we said, they could cost you your life. Judgment and shame cripple a person, but being exposed for who you really are seems horrifying. I'm not having a real good time as I am. As W.H. Auden says in his poem, "The Age of Anxiety": *"We would rather be*

*ruined than changed - We would rather die in dread Than climb the cross of the moment - And let our illusions die."*

So we need help. We see our help in today's reading. Our help of course comes from the Lord. Through His prophet Zephaniah, the Lord tells Israel to rejoice and exult, because He has taken away the judgments against them. He has cleared away their enemies. They will no longer suffer reproach. He will change their shame into praise.

The Lord is speaking to Israel in the now and in the future, the already but not yet. He will move immediately in their lives, but Zephaniah speaks of the One to come – Jesus the Messiah. For ultimately He climbs the cross of the moment in the fullness of time and dies for the sin that makes us hide and divert and deny. God has taken away the judgments against us and laid them all on His Son. He has taken away our shame. He is our ultimate scapegoat.

I love Advent because Advent captures the already but not yet reality of our lives. Already, but not yet. Jesus has already been born. He has already died for our sin and removed our judgment and shame. So we can really come out of hiding. We can look squarely at ourselves in light of his forgiveness and love without diversion or denial. He has turned our shame into praise.

So Jesus is already here. Yet He has not yet come back to solve and resolve the wickedness of the world and the ongoing consequence of sin. This leaves us with an already, but not yet. As an Irish poet says, *"You broke the bonds, you loosed the chains, you carried the cross of my shame. You know I believe it. But, I still haven't found what I'm looking for."*

Already, but not yet. What we're ultimately looking for won't fully come until He comes again. Reproach, judgment and shame creep back in our lives like kudzu. Hiding and denying once again seem like good options. Already, but not yet.

But for the time being, in this age of anxiety and judgment and hiding, we have the gospel message. We have the news to tell one another: rejoice and exult for God has taken away your judgment and shame and reproach. It's OK. It's safe now. You are loved exactly as you are.

But this gospel message is like a fragile rose among the thorns of the world, isn't it. That's why it must be said over and over again. For it is the only hope for abundant and honest life in a reproachful world. A friend said recently, *"I often feel like Lennie from John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. He always asks George to tell him about their dream farm with the alfalfa patch and rabbits and chickens. I always ask people to tell me the gospel. Maybe this means I'm impaired, but who knows?"*

Well, we're all impaired. But thank God we have a story to tell and retell – the Gospel story of Already but Not Yet. Amen.

