

Coffee Stains and New Year Cheer!
Zephaniah 3:14-20

First of all, let me say how delighted I am to be here and to have the opportunity to serve with such warm and wonderful people and staff! I truly look forward to working with Chris and Mark and all the ministries here at Madison Presbyterian so that this church will continue to be both blessed and a blessing to others.

That being said, and this being the small town that it is, I should take a moment to address some “rumors” that preceded my arrival. First, you may have heard that the pastors at MPC are tall and good looking – well, we know which one is tall... You may have heard that when the PNC met to consider calling me to Madison, they voted in my wife, Sheila, before they got around to me. All I can say is that your committee is very discerning and smart... You may have heard that I was inducted last year into the U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame. This is true, but I find it curious that there’s already talk of a stewardship campaign coalescing around this fact. I’ve even heard a possible slogan for 2010: “You know you’d better give, ‘cause the pastor knows where you live!” ...And you may have heard that I love chocolate and coffee. Absolutely! In fact, I love coffee so much that I manage to spill it at almost every opportunity.

I remember the time when I invited a consultant to meet with the Session. He opened by sharing with us his favorite Bible verse. So I opened my Bible to Zephaniah 3:17, at which point I, with the greatest of ease and grace, proceeded to spill my coffee all over the page of scripture

before me. [Present Exhibit 1: coffee stained Bible]. In a mysterious way, I have perceived this incident as no accident at all, but a sign; as if Zephaniah 3 needed to be marked for a time such as this when I could call upon it to guide me into a new year and a new ministry.

After accepting the call to come to MPC, I sought out that pastor and asked him why he chose this passage, and his answer both surprised and delighted me. He said, picture a father putting his child to bed. *The child crawls under the covers afraid because it’s dark, but Daddy says, “I’m here. I won’t let anything hurt you.” Reassured, the child becomes quiet, and as the father looks down upon his precious child, he takes such delight in the moment that he begins to sing, his heart filled with joy.* This, said my friend, is how our Heavenly Father takes great delight in us. So even after we’ve had a bad day, or we’re anxious about a pending problem, or fearful of our future, if we would take with us to our beds at night this loving image of God, we would know deep in our hearts that somehow, somehow, God is our mainstay, and everything will be alright.

I see now how my coffee stain leads me to New Year cheer for Madison Presbyterian Church. I know that God who will be with us every step of the way as we begin this journey together. I know that, as God watches over us, any fear of what the future might bring in 2010 will be replaced by joyful sermons and songs, and words and deeds of encouragement. I know that God envisions for us worship that is not binding, boring or burdensome, but will be the glad gathering of the faithful.

Zephaniah shows us today **a God who has a greater appreciation, love and vision for this church than we do.** So let us turn back any lame excuses or discouraging words or oppressive attitudes, for it is the Lord who gathers us and gives us a home.

This is why I can say with full confidence and sincerity that Sheila and I are excited about getting to know you, and grateful for the opportunity – and yes, at the same time, a little anxious, too – anxious about leaving family and friends behind, anxious about selling a home; anxious about all the things we need to learn about this wonderful church and community in order to fit in and become functional. But Zephaniah’s comforting and reassuring words came to me again through one among you who said to me after I arrived this week, “Welcome home!” And home it will be, I pray, for years to come.

As I look at this spiritual feast before us before us, I also understand that this “welcome home” is not just for us, but for all the “scattered” who God has yet to gather and bring home to MPC. So let’s prepare and pray for them with all the New Year cheer God may bring to 2010.

[Optional illustration]

I think of John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*. The story takes place in a fictitious orphanage in Maine run by Dr. Wilbur Larch. Each night, Dr. Larch takes delight in reading to the boys from a Charles Dickens novel. His voice reassures them that they are safe. He rejoices over them as he reads, and his loving presence quiets them.

Then he turns out the lights and quietly says, “Good night, you princes of Maine, you kings of New England.”

Can’t you almost hear our Heavenly Father saying, “Be of good cheer, you sons and daughters of Madison, you kings and queens of the Church”?