

In Your Midst

Zephaniah 3:14-20

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¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

There is perhaps no other time of year we associate more with joy than this time of year. There are holiday concerts and holiday parties. There are snow days and hours filled with The Hallmark Channel's Christmas movies. There are unexpected gifts and Christmas bonuses. And there are special moments with family and friends. These are the things that make us happy this time of year.

But there is a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness lasts as long as whatever it is that makes you happy lasts. Not indefinitely. Joy, on the other hand, is something that lasts no matter what the circumstances may be. Joy can be found when everything seems to be going against you. Joy can be found when you've lost your job or you've lost a loved one. Joy can be found in spite of terror and outrage. Joy can be found when we are uncertain and afraid.

But, this doesn't seem to make sense. How can there be joy in the midst of heartbreak and fear? After all, as fears mount, reason, hope, and joy are the first victims. But it's when reason, hope, and joy are fading that we need a little Zephaniah.

Zephaniah understood what it was like to see hope and joy fade. He lived in a day of constant terrorism, where fear ruled the land. This is perhaps why Zephaniah has been called the gloomiest of the prophets. He didn't have a lot of good things to say about the time he was living in.

Zephaniah's prophecy took place during the reign of King Josiah, in the late 7th century BC. Barely two generations before Zephaniah, the Assyrians had swept the northern kingdom of Israel off the pages of history. The Assyrian threat remained for the people of Judah, as did the threat from the Babylonian empire. Meanwhile, with these external threats always present, there were internal issues as well. The rulers previous to King Josiah had generated unjust social and political policies. Things were a mess. It was too this mess that Zephaniah began to speak.

The book of Zephaniah is a short but powerful prophecy. Two and a half of the book's three chapters contain a brutal divine assault against those who would dare worship other gods. In the first chapter, Zephaniah condemns Jerusalem. In the second chapter, Zephaniah condemns other nations. Then, in the first half of Chapter 3, he returns to an indictment of Jerusalem. "It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God. (vs. 1-2). The officials are "roaring lions," its prophets are "reckless, faithless persons," and its priests "profane what is sacred" and "do violence to the law." (vs. 3-4)

Zephaniah wrote about what was to result because of their wholehearted rejection of the only God there is: "Their wealth will be plundered, their houses razed. If they build houses, they will not live in them, and if they plant vineyards, they will not drink their wine." (1:13). This was the reversal of the Deuteronomy promise God made to God's

people that they will “lie in houses they did not build and drink the wine of vineyards they did not plant. God has thus rejected them as surely as they have rejected God.

This was the type of truth Zephaniah told through the first eight oracles recorded in chapters 1-3. Zephaniah envisioned a time of widespread devastation and judgment. Image after image builds up a portrait of the destruction that will come on the Day of Lord. The people would be called to account. Repentance and humility would be demanded before God’s mighty judgment.

Yet, it’s all of that which serves as the backdrop for the ninth and concluding oracle in the book of Zephaniah – our scripture lesson from chapter 3. It’s here in the final verses of Zephaniah that God makes a holy interruption, barging into the midst of daily lives.

Given the gloominess and hopelessness described in the previous eight oracles, the tone shift is dramatic. Suddenly, in a grand reversal, the expected judgment becomes overwhelming mercy than leads to new life.

Zephaniah announces that the condemnations pounded out in chapters 1-2 are not the last word. Verses 14-15 feature a call to rejoice based on what God has already done. In verses 16-17, God’s people are encouraged by God’s anticipated triumph. And in verses 18-20, God, speaking in the first person, reiterates what he has done already and what he will do

The arrival of God’s presence dispels fear. “Fear not!” It is the injunction spoken to everyone who encounters the near presence of the Lord, or the Lord’s angel, a presence gracious but nonetheless terrifying. In the Bible, the words “fear not” usually accompany an assurance of God’s presence to save. We know this from the opening chapters of the gospel of Luke. In Luke 1, both Zechariah and Mary are visited by angels who tell them not to fear. And in Luke 2, the fearful shepherds abiding the fields were told not to fear, because that night, in the city of David, a savior had been born.

The message was the same for the people Zechariah was speaking to. Fear not. Do not be afraid. Because “the king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.” (3:15). And this king will not leave.

The presence of this king in their midst also brings about a change. The prophet offers proclamation of release in clear, measured speech befitting a courtroom scene. God’s decision to destroy (punish) has been dropped and the sentence commuted. This makes way for a future that is different from the past.

Now, Zephaniah’s announcement of the Lord’s resolve to save the people carries line-by-line descriptions of why this renewal is necessary. But it is clear that God’s presence in the midst of the community spells peace rather than disaster.

This alone would be enough reason to find joy. But, Zephaniah provides more. The image shifts from God as pardoning judge and king, to God as savior and warrior. In typical Old Testament fashion, salvation has a connotation of victory. There would be rescue and a new world order. Then, in the last few verses, the image shifts again to God as shepherd, gathering the lame and the ones who have strayed, and bringing them home again.

These three images – a pardoning judge and king, a savior and warrior, a caring shepherd – these are enough to signify change. Yet, perhaps the most powerful image of change is the one that depicts God as the one who bursts into song with joy over God’s beloved. Certainly the faithful rejoice at their change in circumstance. But perhaps most shocking is that the God who commutes judgment and sentencing is also the God who rejoices among those who have been released to live another day and in another way. When God rejoices, then something special is afoot. And we can see in verses 19-20 an incredible hope which is based on God’s unconditional love for his people.

The key to this is the Lord’s resolve. When God speaks in the first person singular and states what will happen, there is no doubt about it. God will ensure it happens. None of what is about to happen is dependent on the people’s behavior.

And that's the good news found in Zephaniah. Even though a once-great nation has been brought low and faced disaster (both from external forces and from internal opportunists); and even though in the midst of a crisis and in the face of looming disaster, those who are not directly affected shrug it off with complacency; and even though they have failed to notice the disaster that is already upon them, by misdirecting fear, love, and trust to other gods, making God our enemy, there is still good news. The good news is that while bent on self-destruction, God was faithful even when the people were not. God was in their midst – Emmanuel – the God with us. Further, with disaster averted, the healing commences. The lame and the outcast are gathered. And a now-properly-aligned faith has been God's objective all along. Victory is achieved.

That's how it would be for the people in Zephaniah's day. And that's how it will be for us as well. God's presence will surprise those who assume that God is a benign, indifferent deity who is of little consequence to the reality of daily life. Despite our indifference, despite our hypocrisy, despite the cause for cosmic judgment, God's entry into the world brings celebration, restoration, and new life.

And that's why we need Zephaniah today. When we've been complacent and have misdirected our fear onto other people, and placed our trust in things other than God, we need Zephaniah. We need the correction and joy he brings. And, by the same token, it's why we need Advent every year.

Unless we remember the occasion of the birth of Jesus (its setting in the Roman Empire, during the monstrous reign of Herod, and its reality of poverty and homelessness) we run the yearly risk of making the birth little more than an occasion for presents and parties. It's why it's important to separate mere happiness from the joy made possible in Jesus Christ.

On this Sunday of Advent, we speak of joy, the joy of a people redeemed and restored, but also the joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world. God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And we, we who are wondrously and inexplicably God's beloved,

join in the celebration. We rejoice, giving praise and thanksgiving that God chose to enter into the world in human form and offer a new form of relationship.

However, biblical scholar Melinda Quivik notes that one missing piece in Zephaniah's move from denunciation to rejoicing is the people's orientation. Have they repented? Nothing in Zephaniah indicates repentance. Yet, perhaps the gift of Zephaniah is the utterly unmerited release that comes like the Day of the Lord without warning and is yet complete. Perhaps joy is complete only by divine action.

So, in this season of the year be happy. Be happy as you spend your Christmas bonus. Be happy as you make your way to your Sunday School party or work party. Be happy as you and binge watch those Christmas movies. But in between that merriment, and when life returns to normal after Christmas, be joyful. Be joyful because God is joyful. Be joyful because Jesus Christ has come and is in our midst. Be joyful that a new life is possible. Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

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