



Advent Joy

LISTENING TO ZEPHANIAH

Williamsburg Christian Church

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INTRODUCTION

Until Zephaniah, there hasn't been a prophetic word to Judah since the poet-prophets Isaiah and Micah some 50-60 years ago. Zephaniah isn't your typical prophet. Like the prophets before, he is a poet. But he is more than that. Like the prophets before, he is a social critic. But he is more than that. Like the prophets before, he is a statesman and patriot. But he is more than that. He is a descendant of King Hezekiah, one of Judah's better kings. Royal blood flows through his veins. He is well acquainted with the ins and outs of politics and matters of the state, like the Law of Moses, and he has access to the royal courts.

Zephaniah knows how Judah has lost her way. Once again, pride has led Judah away from God. King Josiah now sits on the throne. His reign began at the age of 8 years old after his father was assassinated. Both his father and grandfather were wicked kings and Judah is a mess, though they are regaining some measure of power and wealth. As a society they've given themselves over to all sorts of injustices, creating systems that oppressed the poor and the widow. They've even tolerated child sacrifices and mixed their worship of God with the worship of false gods. They've persecuted every prophet that came to warn them, prophets like Isaiah and Micah.

ZEPHANIAH

Pride has settled deep into the soil of Judah. Self-absorption (2:1-3; 3:9) has led to a false sense of self-sufficiency (1:10-13, 18, 2:1) resulting self-indulgence (1:8-9, 3:1-5). Judah has fallen into a faithless pride trying to build a society without the reign of God. Oh, don't misunderstand. They still claim to be one nation under God but in the words of Isaiah, they honor God with their mouths but their hearts are far from Him (Isa. 29:13). Worship has turned away from a life of service to mere lip service. No one seeks justice or walks humbly with God (1:4-6, 9; 3:11). Judah's many sins point to one reality: they no longer trust God as Lord and as a consequence, no longer truly worship Him (1:4-6, 9)—they have fallen into faithless pride. Zephaniah has witnessed the fall-out of Josiah's father and grandfather's reign and denounces it as "a rebellious and polluted city."

Word on the street is that Josiah has a different moral disposition than his father and grandfather, and is growing into a fine King, one that seems to pursue the heart of God. This is good news because the world surrounding Judah is becoming unstable. The Assyrian empire which has dominated the world for one hundred years is teetering on disaster. Their rulers have become fickle and unpredictable. Will King Josiah position Judah to become a world leader?

Zephaniah, with his royal blood and all his knowledge of government matters, isn't interested in policy. ***Prophets don't do policy, they do poetry.*** Zephaniah has a word from the Lord and his prophetic vision is one of judgment against Judah and its capital city Jerusalem: the Day of The Lord is coming, and will sweep away everything, including Judah and Jerusalem and all those responsible for this sorry state of affairs.

THE TEXT

At this point a whole chapter of judgment has taken place. Imagine him roaming the streets of Judah preaching these words. Heavy words filled with darkness and expressive images color his prophetic message. **Read Zephaniah 1:1-18.**

Zephaniah seems to have a couple of questions on his mind woven throughout his prophetic message.

1. *Who rules Judah's life?*
2. *Can they construct a world without God as Lord and still flourish?*

God's passionate and *jealous* love for His people will not allow him to step aside and watch the people He loves continue destroying themselves. With a furious love God seeks to transform them into a worshipping and justice-seeking community, one marked by holiness, compassion and righteousness. In keeping with the ministry of the prophets, a message of impending judgment is accompanied with a call to repentance.

Zephaniah 2:1-3

Gather yourselves together;
gather together, undesirable nation,
2 before the decree takes effect
and the day passes like chaff,
before the burning of the Lord's anger overtakes you,
before the day of the Lord's anger overtakes you.
3 Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth,
who carry out what He commands.
Seek righteousness, seek humility;
perhaps you will be protected
on the day of the Lord's anger.

God speaks in verses 12-13, the prophet takes up the speech in verse 13 and offers a prayer for the priest to pray in verse 17.

Tend to the details of the text. Zephaniah has a specific word for the faithful ones (called in the Scriptures, "the remnant") living in the midst of the sin and idolatry because there always seem to be faithful people in the midst of unfaithfulness. He is calling for them to step up and out from the shadows of injustice and idolatry, and wants them to lead the way to the repentance and restoration of Judah (see 3:9, 18, 19, 20). Reads verse 3. If they step out in seeking justice (righteousness) by righting wrongs and seek humility, they will stand underneath the judgement of God ("perhaps you'll be protected). And as always, in God's time He will restore their society and fill it with joy and celebration. This leads us to our main text.

OUR FOCUS TEXT

Zephaniah 3:14-17

14 Sing for joy, **Daughter Zion**; shout loudly, **Israel!**

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!

15 The Lord has **removed your punishment**;
He has **turned back your enemy**.

The **King of Israel, Yahweh, is among you**;
you need **no longer fear** harm.

16 On that day it will be said to Jerusalem:

“Do not fear; Zion, do not let your hands grow weak.

17 Yahweh your God is among you,

a mighty one who will save.

He will rejoice over you with gladness.

He will **hold his peace in His love.**

He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.

SOME DETAILED OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE TEXT

You can see there in the streets of Judah the faithful ones of God throwing a party— shouting out in words of joy to one another, dancing and laughing over the fact that the God who created the heavens and earth knows them, loves them and reigns over them in love. And there in the midst of His celebrating people, is God rejoicing and dancing over them. Zephaniah wants us to see that this celebration, this street party, is a celebration of joyous love where God and His people dance and sing together.

What we can know from Zephaniah’s prophetic message is that according to 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles King Josiah turned out to be a godly king. He boldly and courageously purged idolatry from Judah. He ordered that the Temple be renovated so that true worship could be restored and led to a rediscovery of the Scriptures which spurred a national return to the values and practices commanded through the Law of Moses. A season of renewal and joy was experienced by Judah until his death in the field of battle.

But scholars believe this text is also a picture of the age that is to come in the Christ—in Advent. Read the text again and see with the eyes of faith the picture the poet-prophet imaginatively sets before us.

For us these promises are coming true in the gospel of Christ, if we would but open our eyes. The good news for us is that King of Israel is Lord of the Church who is God’s restored Israel and the people of Zion (look at v. 14). The Lord is present in our midst by the Spirit as we gather around his Table (look at v. 15 & v. 17). God’s judgements have been removed (look at v. 15). God has held his peace and proven his love in the outstretched arms and nail-printed hands of our Lord (look at v. 17) as our mighty Savior (look at v. 17). The enemy and all his schemes have been defeated and cast out, and

we have nothing left to fear in this life (look again at v. 15). A life lived in the loving reign of God has become our freedom because He rejoices us over us in his love (look at v. 17). We have been delivered from the reign of sin and death and all its fear, and into the loving reign of grace because Christ our Lord has come and is coming again, and this is our joy!

The heart of God has been unveiled in the Advent of the Christ-child. He yearns to share His life with us and enjoy them forever. The King of the universe is the King of love and He wants us more than we want him. It is his love that purifies and transforms us into a people who fully trust his rule and can celebrate his reign with all their hearts. God is satisfied by his love for us and that brings him much joy! He wants us to know the deep pleasure of what it means to be satisfied by His presence and rejoicing over us as His beloved so that we too will know His joy. He wants us to become a people of joy!

REFLECT

* Due to the nature of this particular study you will be invited to search the Scriptures in deeper ways. There are many texts the questions will call to your attention. If you are able, please take the time to read these texts. If you have any questions as to why these texts were selected or as to what they possibly mean, please reach out to me via email fredliggin@gmail.com. May God's Spirit grant you eyes to see and a heart to understand. ~ Fred

Consider this explanation of joy:

"Joy is not some feeling of fleeting optimism, but a state of mind and an orientation of the heart. Joy is a satisfied state of mind that takes pleasure in the loving reign of King Jesus over our lives and turns our hearts away from fear and to the One who says, "Do not fear for I am with you." Joy is a settled state of contentment, confidence and hope, not in ourselves, but in the faithful love of God who reigns with compassion and grace. It is the settled assurance and quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright because God's kingdom, of which I am its citizen, will never falter or fail because Jesus is Lord. So joy, more than some feeling of fleeting optimism, arises from the ashes of a world prone to anxiety, disappointment, and fear, and strengthens our feet to walk by faith trusting in the power and promised presence of Christ in our midst by the Spirit."

1. Can you identify any areas of your life where you feel a consistent sense of dissatisfaction (spiritually, emotionally, physically)? If so, what are they? If not, how is God satisfying your heart and bringing you joy in each area?

C. How has the Lord removed our punishment? Or to ask this question in a deeper way, *from* where and what have we been rescued and *into* where and what have we been delivered? See Colossians 1:13-14, 21-22 (don't miss verse 13); Romans 5:6-21; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 2:16-17; Ephesians 1:3-14.

D. How has God held his peace in his love? See Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:14-15

E. How has the Lord turned back our enemies? See Colossians 2:14-15; Romans 16:20; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28

F. How has fear been eliminated from the life of the Church? See John 16:33; 1 Peter 3:14; 1 John 4:18; Romans 8:14-16

4. What images does Jesus paint of God in Luke 15:3-7, 8-10 and 11-32.

5. Consider this statement from Sunday's message: *"The Eucharistic Table is a sign of the party that is going to come. The God who is preparing the great banquet hall of glory for all to come and party is playing music over us now. If only we would have the ears of faith to hear it and join in the rhythm of community of God walking hand in hand to the table. That is eucharist. That is joy. Celebrate and be satisfied in the presence of God."*

The word *eucharist* means thanksgiving [*eucharistēsas* in greek]. The word is found in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. It appears to be used by Paul in order to deliberately point back to each account of the Passover referred to by Christians as "the Last Supper" (Mark 14:22-25, Matthew 26:26-29, Luke 22:14-20).

Read Luke 14:15-24. How does our weekly practice of the Eucharist remind us of the "great banquet" to come in Luke 14:15-24?

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE OF JOY

As you light the candle of hope, peace and joy this week consider asking the following questions, one each night. How can Jesus become the joy of the world? How can Jesus become the joy of our nation? How can Jesus become the joy of our neighborhood? How can Jesus become the joy of our friends? How can Jesus become the joy of our own lives?

CONCLUDING MEDITATION

Let us not allow the events of our world or nation to get us confused about the source of our joy or what joy is. The third Sunday of Advent invites us to remember that joy is not some feeling of fleeting optimism, but a state of mind and an orientation of the heart. Joy is a satisfied state of mind that takes pleasure in the loving reign of King Jesus over our lives and turns our hearts away from fear and to the One who says, "Do not fear for I am with you, rejoicing over you with singing!" Joy is a settled state of contentment, confidence and hope, not in ourselves, but in the faithful love of God who reigns with compassion and grace. It is the settled assurance and quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright because God's kingdom, of which I am its citizen, will never falter or fail because Jesus is Lord. So joy, more than some feeling of fleeting optimism, arises from the ashes of a world prone to anxiety, disappointment and fear, and strengthens my feet to walk by faith trusting in the power and promised presence of Christ in our midst by the Spirit.

We must also remember that in the Christ-child God began his **great reversal** of all things, a new ordering of things because His kingdom has come. It is a "great reversal" because what we think should work no longer works, at least not in light of the Lordship of Jesus. We will no longer find our lives by gaining, but by giving. The first will no longer remain first because the last and least will take first place. No longer can you or I choose who is "in" and who is "out" because at God's Table all are welcome.

There is a new way of being in society and a new way of doing must follow. If we are to see our lives flourish in the joy of Advent we cannot sit around like spectators in a theater enjoying friendly Christmas pageants. **This Christ-child who is Lord of all tells us that we must join in the action that is taking place and be drawn in as participants in this great reversal of all things.** As a community empowered by God's Spirit we choose to live like it is true.

Our long expected King Jesus has proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God as good news and demonstrated the nature of that reign announcing that forgiveness of sins is available to all—no one is beyond redemption; all the sicknesses of our bodies, even the sicknesses of the darkest of hearts, can be healed; no demons, past, present or future, can have power over our lives as the power of God has come to us and is able to break any chains that weigh us down. Even the last, least, left-out and lonely are finally welcomed to the Table of the Lord and none of us have the right to choose who is welcomed. And through it all, Jesus invites all of us to leave the realities of the old way of doing things behind to serve the coming future of God that has broken in before our eyes. We can choose to no longer live according to the rules of the old age that is passing away, an age where fear, anxiety and violence reigns, and live according to the new age breaking in where self-giving love has the power to satisfy our souls and become our joy by the power of the Spirit.

When our joy is deep and our love flows wide by the power of the Spirit working within, among and between us, we will finally become instruments of peace and joy to bring hope to a world crushed by the weight of sorrow and fear. We can bear witness to joy.

1. During this holiday season what are some practical ways you can live in accordance to the “great reversal” of all things? For example, how can you purposefully choose to (literally) go “last” instead of “first” (i.e. practice letting others go ahead of you in lines, etc)? What can you choose to give up so you can give (i.e. ask a family member to buy something for a Kenyan AIDS orphan or make a donation to a local area organization instead of getting you a gift, etc)? Who are you always trying to avoid and how can you welcome them to your table (i.e. over for dinner, to a cup of coffee, to a different a fun outing, etc)?

PRAYER

O God of Zephaniah and the Apostles, through all such faithful ones you proclaim the unfolding of future joy and renewed life. Strengthen our hearts to believe your advent promise that one day we will walk in the holy way of Christ, where sighing and sorrowing will be no more and the journey of God’s people will be joy. Amen.

(An adaptation of a prayer from the Revised Common Lectionary)