



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina  
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### **A Reason to Sing Zephaniah 3:14-20**

Don't you just love Christmas music?

If you don't, you'd better not turn on your radio. Not so long ago it was hard to find much Christmas music on the radio up until the week before Christmas. But over the past decade, some radio stations have carved out a niche for the Christmas music market. They start playing it right after Halloween—almost as early as the stores!

I enjoy Christmas music, all kinds of Christmas music. So much of it is joyful, and a lot of the old secular songs are just plain *fun*. I mean, what's not to like about "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Jingle Bell Rock," and "Sleigh Ride"? One of my and Jo Ann's personal favorites is "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas"!

Of course I like the sacred Christmas music best. Our music ministry's presentation this evening will be a wonderful example of the power of sacred Christmas music. And the carols we sing together like "Silent Night," "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and "Joy to the World!"—it just doesn't get much better than these. Anthems like "O Holy Night" and "Angels We Have Heard on High" move us deeply. And Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" stirs something in me too deep for words almost every time I hear it. What would Advent and Christmas be like without singing?

### ***Singing in the Scriptures***

The Bible is full of singing and music.

In Exodus 15, Moses and the children of Israel sang after they had crossed the sea on dry ground, but Pharaoh and his army drowned as the waters rushed back into place. In Judges 5, Deborah the judge sang with Barak the military leader when Israel defeated Sisera and his army. And if Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 after she gave her little boy Samuel back to the LORD wasn't a song, it should have been! Sometimes the prophets sang. And the psalmists gave Israel her hymnbook.

In Luke 1:46-55, which we heard earlier in our service today, Mary the mother of our Lord sang when she visited her cousin Elizabeth after the angel Gabriel had announced to her that she would bear the Messiah. The old priest Zacharias sang in Luke 1:67-79 when his tongue was loosed after the naming of his son—the one we know as "John the Baptist." The angels sang when they announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds in the field in Luke 2:13-14. Paul called on believers to sing in Ephesians 5:19. And in Revelation, John saw and heard the multitudes of heaven singing time and again (Revelation 5:9-10; 15:2-4; 19:1-8)!

### ***When it's hard to sing***

But sometimes it's hard to sing. We don't feel like singing, sometimes even when, or *especially* when everybody else around us is singing.

I think that's particularly true during the holidays. Sometimes it's because we've lost loved ones and miss them so much at that time when family is such a focus. Sometimes it's because of strained or even fractured relationships within our families. Maybe it's economic stress over not being able to give someone we love all we want to, or because we overextend ourselves financially to do it. Maybe it's the thought, as I once heard someone put it, of how sad some kids will be at Christmas because they've gotten so little, if anything at all.

Sometimes we just don't feel like singing. Sometimes we don't feel like we have *any reason to sing*.

Well, trust me, we're not the first ones to feel that way! It was that way with the Jews of Zephaniah's day.

You may actually never have heard of him, at least not to remember him, until today. Zephaniah the prophet is *not* one of the better-known characters in the Bible. His book resides among what we call the Minor Prophets (what the Jews call the "Book of the Twelve"). It's sandwiched between Habakkuk and Haggai. I have to confess that in nearly four decades of preaching almost every Sunday, this is only about the fifth time I've preached from the book of Zephaniah. But here he is before us today, and he has a word from the Lord for us.

### ***Zephaniah's message***

Zephaniah the prophet was the great-great-grandson of Judah's King Hezekiah, so he was a member of the royal household, and a distant cousin of the current king, young Josiah. He probably prophesied between 630 and 625 BC, before the extensive religious and ethical reforms King Josiah made when he came to full power. We don't know much else about Zephaniah, except that he seems to have been familiar with the works and words of Isaiah and Amos, who both prophesied about 150 years earlier.

What were things like in Judah during his ministry? Historically, scholars<sup>1</sup> tell us that the Assyrian Empire was on the wane, with its power failing fast. Judah and other small countries in the region had been subject to the Assyrian Empire. With Assyria's decline, these countries were looking to become more independent. But the Babylonians were also on the rise. The Scythians were a barbaric people from what is now southern Russia who would soon sweep down through Asia Minor into Palestine toward Egypt. Simply put, the Scythians were terrorists.

From what Zephaniah says, it appears to have been a time of apostasy, or even worse, syncretism, when the people of Judah were trying to serve the pagan gods Baal and Milcom (Molech) alongside or instead of the LORD God of Israel. This was of course a blatant violation of the first commandment—"You shall have no other gods before Me."<sup>2</sup> The royals and nobles had adopted pagan dress, as well as pagan superstitions and customs.

The priests were idolatrous, leading the people to worship the starry host. Some had turned their backs on the LORD altogether; others paid Him lip service along with their idolatry. They were trusting in their economic security, and had become complacent. The worst insult was that they thought God was disinterested, that He didn't care what they were doing, that He had no concern for justice and righteousness among His people. They thought, "The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil" (1:12).

Then Zephaniah came on the scene. He wasn't as eloquent as Isaiah or as fiery as Amos. His poetry wasn't as polished as either. But his word, or rather *God's word* through him, was as clear

as could be: The great day of the LORD, is near; it is near and hastens quickly (1:14a).

What was this day of the LORD?

In ancient Israel, the idea of the day of the LORD described how God would intervene decisively in history to punish sin and set wrongs right so things might be as God intended them to be. Usually, the people of Israel thought of the day of the LORD as a time when God would act against their enemies, who were, of course, in their view, God's enemies.

Amos had redefined all that when he had told the people of the northern kingdom that while they were expecting that day to be one of light and blessing for them, they would suffer the same fate as their enemies, because they had been unfaithful to God and His covenant with them. Zephaniah's message is a similar one. Later in the book he pronounces judgment on Judah's neighbors, but he *first* pronounces it on Judah, holding leaders responsible for leading the people astray, and holding the people responsible for following them.

Zephaniah paints a devastating picture—everything and everyone being swept from the face of the earth in total destruction. God says He has prepared Judah as a sacrifice for that day, a day when there will be wailing and crying throughout Jerusalem. Not one offender will go unpunished, because the LORD will search Jerusalem with lamps to find every one of them. It will be a bitter day of wrath, distress, anguish, trouble and ruin, darkness and gloom, clouds and blackness. There will be trumpets and battle cries and distress and bloodshed. Economic security won't save them; in fact, *nothing will!* There will be no escaping His wrath that day!

Not much to sing about here, is there?

### ***Songs of joy***

And yet when we get to the last chapter of this little book, Zephaniah proclaims that after all this judgment, there would be *hope* for *all the peoples* who would turn to the LORD, and the remnant of Israel would be redeemed (3:9-13). God would act! He would deliver His people! Indeed, He would deliver the peoples!

With that declaration, it was time for rejoicing! So *Zephaniah called for songs of joy as he saw the coming day of the LORD's deliverance.*

When that day would come it would be said that God is with them. He is mighty to save. He will take delight in them, quiet them with His love, and *He* will rejoice over them *with singing* (3:16-17)!

When God would restore their fortunes, He would remove their sorrow, deal with their oppressors, rescue the lame, gather the scattered, and give them honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth (3:18-20).

What a beautiful oracle! What a glorious promise! Through Zephaniah, God was giving His people *a reason to sing!*

And even though it's sometimes hard for us to see it or feel it, He has given us one, too.

"What?" you say. "Look at my situation! Look at what's going on in the world! Look at all the suffering and hurt and disappointment and despair! How can you say He's given us a reason to sing?"

Almost 2,000 years ago, God worked His greatest deliverance ever. He sent His Son to Bethlehem as a little baby who would save His people from their sins. It looked totally different than what they were expecting, but His coming set God's mighty deliverance in motion. Through His life, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ conquered the real enemies, *sin* and *death*. Through faith in Him He sets us right with God and promises us resurrection and

eternity with Him.

So in the same spirit that Zephaniah prophesied, I proclaim to you today that *whatever we're facing, God's gracious deliverance in Christ gives us ample reason to sing!* Even when things look the worst, we who are believers in Jesus Christ can sing!

*We can sing because we know that Christ has come to set us right with God!* We could never earn this right relationship by our own good works, but He graciously gives it to us when we turn to Him, trusting Him as our Savior and Lord. That's a reason to sing!

*We can sing because Christ has come to us and abides with us through His Spirit dwelling in us!* This salvation and deliverance He has brought isn't just a one-shot deal. It's a lifelong journey of being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ! Through His Holy Spirit He's with us, dwelling *in* us individually and *among* us as His people. We experience a real relationship with God in Christ. We learn His ways and He lives out His life through us. We join Him in His mission of bringing redemption to the world. That's a reason to sing!

*We can sing because we know that Christ will come again to raise the dead, judge the world, and set all things right in new heavens and a new earth!* That's why we can sing even when wars rage, when famine spreads, when oppression dominates, when hardships abound. These things are not the last word! Jesus Christ will have the last word! As the hymn writer<sup>3</sup> so powerfully put it:

This is my Father's world,  
O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the Ruler yet.  
This is my Father's world,  
The battle is not done;  
Jesus, who died, shall be satisfied,  
And earth and heav'n be one!

So *sing*, O people of God!  
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart!  
The Lord your God is with you, and He is mighty to save! Amen!

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<sup>1</sup> Articles on the book of Zephaniah in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and notes from the *NIV Study Bible* offer helpful historical background for this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> Maltbie D. Babcock, "This Is My Father's World."