

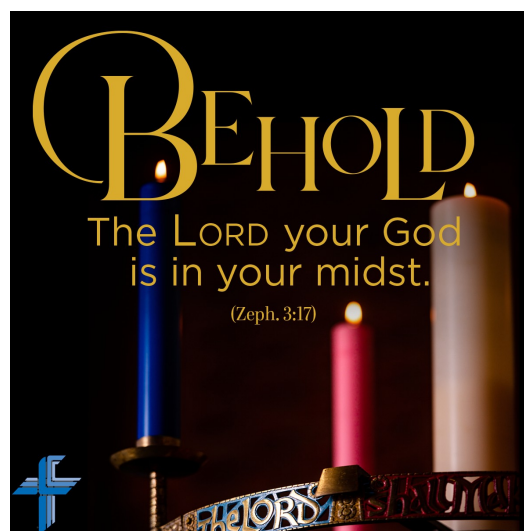
The Third Sunday in Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 12, 2021

“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love.”

Zep 3:17.



The Joy of the Lord

Dear brothers and sisters: grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are spending these Sundays in Advent looking at Old Testament readings which come from the prophets, first Jeremiah, then Malachi, now Zephaniah, and finally Micah next week for the final Sunday in Advent. So perhaps we should address a very basic question concerning all of these Scriptures: what does a prophet actually do? If you were to describe that job in the time of the Old Testament prophets, what would it be? Here is a good summary: the prophet of the Lord Most High is concerned with the actions of God in human history, pointing us toward the final judgement. In other words, the prophet speaks the Word of God into the current time that God's people are experiencing, and shows them how God is actively working in and through the things that are happening to them, for the purpose of showing them who He is, in order that they would repent and turn to Him, that they would receive forgiveness and be saved from sin and death.

The prophet Zephaniah is an almost perfect demonstration of this job description. The entire thing is only three chapters, it only takes about 5 or 10 minutes to read the entire book, and I encourage you to do that. In those three chapters Zephaniah brings God's Word concerning the "day of the Lord." This is about judgement, but also about promise, and the fulfillment of that promise. This is why we are looking at the prophets during Advent, for Advent is also a time of promise, and the fulfillment of that promise, leading us always to the expectation of that final day. Today we hear the end of this small book of prophecy, and these verses deal with that same end, this is the announcement of joy and rejoicing that comes to the people. This is the joy of the Lord, it comes from hearing that God is for us, not against us, because He has come to be in our midst. The Bethlehem Babe fulfills this coming, for He is God made flesh, and He comes to be with us, as St. John tells us: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."¹ We who are living on this side of the Incarnation hear the prophet's pronouncement of rejoicing as nothing other than a clear reference to the coming of the Saviour in the manger: "The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil."²

The first two-thirds of Zephaniah's prophecy have a much different character. We need to understand what is happening in the first two chapters in order to properly hear the final verses that we encounter today. Chapter one starts like this: "I will

¹ Jn 1:14.

² Zep 3:15.

utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,' declares the LORD."³ This is judgement pronounced on the house of Judah. This is what we have been hearing throughout our readings in these prophets. This is their job, to pronounce God's Word in the midst of the things that are going to happen in real time to the people of Israel. The big event that these prophets, like Zephaniah, are warning the people about is the upcoming conquest by the nation of Babylon, after which the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed and the people will be taken captive in chains and marched off to exile. Everything will be swept away, nothing will be the same. This is the Day of the Lord. The Holy God cannot tolerate the worship of the Lord and the worship of other, false gods at the same time. In this sense perhaps the worship of people in the time of Zephaniah is not unlike our own time. Many people would say they are "spiritual," that they are willing to accept the idea of God, but they will not give allegiance to the Lord alone. The false gods of Islam, Buddhism, even the materialism and prosperity teaching found in the Christian church today, these are all welcome on the same level as the One True God and His Word. Today's people, like those of the ancient world, lose the guidance and strength found only in the Living Lord, they exchange His blessings for the impotence of pagan worship, daily horoscopes, and lust for material possessions. So you see, the job of the prophet resonates down through the centuries. The Word of God still speaks to us today with the same message: repent, turn away from the worship of idols and false gods, turn back to the grace and mercy of the Living God. People can take it or leave it, but it

³ Zep 1:2.

doesn't change the Message, it doesn't change the Messenger. It doesn't change what God sets out to accomplish. There will be no middle ground, no half-way measures, no dipping the toe in the water to see if repentance is something that will "work for me." The prophet goes out of his way to expose the "practical atheists," those who who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.'"⁴

So Zephaniah brings this pronouncement of judgement to a frightful climax. He proclaims that "the great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast...a day of wrath is that day."⁵ This will be a day of devastating defeat. This comes about because people have sinned against God. That's how we understand sin, something that is not very popular today. Sin is first and foremost against God. David says as much in the penitential words of Psalm 51: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."⁶ Human beings might try to categorize our transgressions into varying levels of severity. Let's see – perhaps we can think of some sins as serious, some as mediocre, and some as merely insignificant. Perhaps this is a good way to shift uncomfortable thoughts about our own standing before God onto others. After all, if my sins are only mediocre or insignificant, surely then I'm not as bad as that group over there, right? But true sorrow for sin comes in repentance. The Holy Spirit works through God's Word to bring about what we

⁴ Zep 1:12.

⁵ Zep 1:14–15.

⁶ Ps 51:4.

Lutherans label contrition, when we come to understand the depths of our iniquity which keeps us apart from a holy and righteous God. We come to understand as well what it means to God, because we hear of the judgement, the day of wrath, which will be poured out, when Christ returns again in glory to judge both the living and the dead. What Zephaniah pronounced to the people of Judah, who had forsaken God and lusted after false Gods, was realized first in the terrible calamity brought upon them by the nation of Babylon. But this also points us ahead to that final day of judgement, when all things will be made new again, when sin, death, and devil will once and for all be vanquished.

So if it is only by true repentance, which is worked in us by the Word of God, that we can understand contrition and sorrow for our sin, then likewise – even more so! – can we have access to and receive the other side of repentance, which is the Gospel pronouncement of absolution. This is when by faith we hear the Gospel message that your sins are forever removed from God's sight for the sake of Christ Jesus, He who suffered and died on the cross. Now the day of the Lord so vividly depicted by the prophet is not a fearful day of wrath, but a moment of rejoicing, because the wrath we deserve has been removed, poured out on Jesus. In His person God has come into our midst to bear our sins and be our Saviour. Here is the joy in this Advent season, as we anticipate the birth of the Christ Child, the Word made flesh in the womb of Mary, who brings peace with God. This Sunday is called *Gaudete* Sunday, the Latin word for rejoice. Today we light the rose-coloured candle in the Advent wreath to further remind us of this message of joy. This is the joy of the Lord

that we have in this season. We hear how Zephaniah exhorts God's people to sit up and pay attention to what the Lord has done – four times in the very first verse of our reading: Sing aloud! Shout! Rejoice! Exult! The redeemed should indeed be glad. Consider the entire counsel of what the prophet speaks, and then look at what a gracious and merciful God has delivered His people from. Those who repent and believe (Mark 1:15) have forgiveness. And hope. And life everlasting. There is much to celebrate.

But there is another remarkable understanding of the “joy of the Lord” that Zephaniah speaks of this morning. Not only is the “The LORD your God...in your midst, a mighty one who will save,”⁷ but God is also rejoicing! With gladness! In His coming the Lord will quiet you by his love, all fear is now gone. And the Lord will even exult over you with loud singing. God delights, He quiets, He bursts into song over you. Here we have the John 3:16 of the Old Testament, “for God so loved the world...” Here is the reason for your deliverance. God loves you. He cares for you. So much that His Word tells us that He rejoices over you. It's hard to comprehend, that the creator of the universe would condescend and be with those who don't deserve it, and that He exults with loud singing over the salvation of His people. But this is what He did in the sending of His only begotten Son, and our Lord still comes to be in your midst today in the preaching of this Word, and in the Sacraments that Christ has left with us, according to His institution and command. This amazing love of God for us human beings is not explainable by our reason or knowledge. We

⁷ Zep 3:17.

could never deserve it. We would never dream up such a God on our own. But this is who He is. “God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”⁸ This is a “cross kind of love.” To know this is to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”⁹ The love of God is revealed upon Calvary in the blood of Christ. It is revealed in a baby boy born in the most humble of circumstances, laid in a manger on a dark night two thousand years ago.

He comes for you, and the angels also rejoice in heaven, they sing His praises in the night sky over Bethlehem. The greatest reason for our rejoicing on this *Gaudete* Sunday is found here in these words from this amazing prophet Zephaniah. We rejoice in Him, because the Lord God, our Gracious King and Saviour, rejoices in us. And so with St. Paul, let us “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”¹⁰

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria

⁸ 1 Jn 4:8–9.

⁹ Eph 3:19.

¹⁰ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:4.