

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church Modesto, California
The Third Sunday in Advent
December 14, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Zephaniah 3:14-17

¹⁴ Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel!

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

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.

The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

¹⁶ On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save.

He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." (NIV)

A Message from the King Brings Joy

Message from the King: a story

There was once a village ruled by a king. The king lived on the top of a high hill, far above the village. No one in the village had ever seen him, but they lived under his care and protection. In the past, the villagers had been loyal to the one who ruled them, but in recent years they had begun to turn away. Instead of trusting the king's protection, they sought out other rulers, other lords who made them promises that they would never keep. They amassed wealth, reasoning that they could buy their way out of trouble. About the king the villagers grew more and more distrustful. Year by year, the gulf between the king and the villagers grew deeper.

There were some people in the village, however, who remained loyal to the king. They numbered only a few. They continued to respect him as their ruler. They did their work for him as best they could. They trusted in the assurances he had made them and their parents and grandparents years before. Yet even these people sometimes doubted the king's good will and power.

One day, a messenger from the king came to the village, a royal herald come to make a proclamation. He gathered the villagers to hear the message from their lord. After a silence had fallen on the crowd, he began to speak. "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the king. (See Zephaniah 1:2) The king will have his day," he said. ¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness... ¹⁷ I will bring distress on the people... because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. ¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath. (Zephaniah 1:15,17,18a) A stunned silence overtook the crowd. The messenger continued. ¹ Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation... before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's wrath comes upon you. ³ Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger. (Zephaniah 2:1-3)

The messenger then proceeded to tell the people that the king was going to descend the hill to conquer all, leaving devastation in his wake. And which village would be the first to fall? Theirs! When he had finished his message of doom, the messenger left.

Do you know how the villagers reacted to the message? Astoundingly, most of them ignored it! Didn't they fear that the king would learn of their disloyalty and come to punish them for it? Not really. "The king will do nothing," they said. "Besides, who needs him? Our alliances will protect us, and we've got enough money to buy what we need." Most just shrugged off the king and his threats.

Not the remnant of people loyal to the king. They knew the messenger had spoken the truth. They knew that the king was right to be enraged at their village. So many people did not trust him anymore. And these loyal servants of the king, they knew that even they had doubted his power. They had not served him with the faithfulness he deserved.

The loyal remnant was devastated. And you could sense it when you looked at them. You noticed first the quiet. These people who had once composed and sung songs for the king now spent their days in stunned silence. And you could see it in their hands. Hands once been alive and working for the king now hung limp by people's sides. "Why bother?" people thought. "The king has promised to judge us, and we know he's right."

Not long after his first visit, though, the messenger came back. While many ignored him, the faithful remnant listened carefully. They expected more doom from the messenger. But that's not at all what they got. The messenger gathered them around. "Shout for joy! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart!" The people couldn't believe their ears. *How can we be happy?* they thought. *We know the king is coming in retribution, and we know we deserve his wrath.* The messenger continued, "The LORD has taken away your punishment." *That's why we can be happy and even shout for joy; the king has decided to take away any punishment that we deserved! We should have been condemned and executed, but the king has commuted our death sentence.* And more—the messenger said, "The king has turned back your enemy." *We knew it; the king was protecting us all along!* "On the day he comes, it will be said about you, 'Do not be afraid. Do not let your hands hang limp. Take heart! Keep on laboring for the king. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save.'" *The king is mighty, not just to judge and punish, but to love and to save.*

The faithful people of the village could hardly believe it. The king did notice them. He was coming to deal with all who turned on him and would not turn back, but he wanted those who loved him to know that he loved them, too. The messenger added this final comfort from the king: He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

Clouds began to lift from the faithful villagers' hearts. Heads lifted. Smiles returned. Someone began to sing softly. Then more voices joined. Hands that had been hanging limp suddenly sprang to life. There was work to be done for the king!

And so in the village, among those faithful to the king, hearts were brave again, and arms were strong. The king had made this transformation, all through a message, delivered by a messenger, a man named Zephaniah.

The message for us: "Rejoice with all your heart..."

That is—in a slightly altered form, of course—the story of the book of Zephaniah. The king is the LORD. The villagers, the people with whom the Lord had a special relationship, are the people of Israel and Judah.

The Lord's command, "Rejoice with all your heart," seems out of place in this Bible book. Most of Zephaniah's book is filled with forecasts of God's great day, that is, any day

on which the Lord steps into the world to execute his justice. Zephaniah is, for the most part, pretty gloomy. Many of these people, in spite of all that the Lord had promised them, turned away from him. If you look at life in the time of Zephaniah, you will note some frightening signs of spiritual decay. Among them:

- **Apathy.** People didn't care about the Lord, their King. They simply weren't interested in him or in cultivating a relationship with him. They thought God and his Word irrelevant, having nothing to do with their lives. "The Lord will do nothing, neither good nor bad," they would say (Zeph 1:6).
- **Syncretism**, that is, mixing true religion with false. Some people of Judah would swear by the Lord and also by Molech, a false god whose worship featured killing babies (Zeph 1:5). People evidently saw no problem with cafeteria-style religion: picking whatever religious teaching they liked and believing in it.
- **Believing in everything but the Lord.** While people in Judah were dismissing the Lord and his Word as meaningless, they were dabbling in the occult and looking to the stars for guidance in their lives (Zeph 1:5). People were willing to believe just about anything, except the Word of the Lord.
- **Religious leaders not helping matters.** The religious leaders should have been the ones trying to put on the brakes. They ought to have been calling the people to repent, to turn to the Lord. But they didn't. Her prophets, Zephaniah said of Judah, are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. (Zeph 3:4)

Can you imagine living in a land like that? Can you imagine... people not caring about the true God or what he says in his holy Book? ...people mixing and matching religious beliefs to suit their tastes? ...people turning to occult practices rather than God, or looking for secret codes in the Bible rather than hearing its simple message? ...religious leaders who confuse people instead of telling them the plain truth about themselves and God? Can you imagine?

We don't have to imagine, do we? We know of a land eerily similar to Judah in the 6th Century BC. We see spiritual apathy and syncretism and willingness to believe anything and everything. Welcome to 21st Century America. Should we be surprised to learn that the Lord is enraged?

And there's something even worse. It's what those faithful people of the village realized: we are part of the problem. Not prioritizing the Lord and his Word—we're guilty. Wanting to affirm other religions, even ones that deny the preeminence of Jesus—we long to be applauded for being open-minded and tolerant. Considering the Word of God irrelevant—let's all look at our own lives and see what role God and his Word really play. Is God the main character in our lives, or just an extra whom we call on once in a while? What we confessed earlier is true: we deserve God's punishment both now and in eternity.

But strangely, God tells us to rejoice. In Zephaniah 3:14 there are four different words—all of them commands—to be happy, to rejoice, to express joy with our voices.

That's hard to do, however, when the distance between the king and us shows itself, as it often does in our world and in our lives. When we feel the press of godlessness from around us, or when we feel the guilt of sin that we've brought on ourselves, we don't much feel like rejoicing. And that is fitting. God does want us to realize the seriousness of our broken relationship with him. He wants us to own up to our guilt and admit that we deserve his punishment. But God does not want us to stay in the depths forever. So he lovingly lifts us up. He says, "Rejoice with all your heart, because I rejoice over you."

"...because the Lord rejoices over you."

God often does things in a strange way. Often it goes something like this: he commands us to have something, and then he gives us what he commands! That's the case here. God commands us to rejoice, and then he enables us to do that. If we look at Zephaniah's words, we can discover reasons to rejoice:

- **“The Lord has taken away your punishment.”** We just said that God wants us to know that we deserve his punishment. What God wants us to know just as much is that he has taken our punishment away. Here's what he did: he took our punishment, all the hell that we deserved because of our disloyalty to him, and he placed it on his only Son. Jesus took our punishment and suffered it. As a result, that death sentence has been taken away from us. We live as convicts who have been fully pardoned, whose record has been cleared, all because of Jesus. That's a reason to be happy!
- **“The Lord, the King, is with you.”** God is not off in the universe somewhere looking at us from a distance. He is here with us. Nowhere did this become more true than when Jesus, the very Son of God, became fully human and walked on this planet. We sang a song to him this morning, “Come, Emmanuel.” Emmanuel means (and this is a perfect name for Jesus) “God with us.”
- **“The Lord is mighty to save.”** We're not helpless victims. We are people living under the King of kings, the one to whom the most powerful in the world will one day have to bow the knee. Our God is warrior, not afraid to step in and destroy the enemies that threaten us. In fact, Jesus, by dying and then rising back to life, destroyed death, the enemy we'll all have to face.
- **The Lord, the King of the universe, loves us with the tenderness of a parent.** I remember when our first daughter was born. Holding her was incredible. I sang songs to her sometimes. Other times, I just looked at her while she slept in my arms. It's hard to describe that feeling. Well, with love that intense, the Lord, your Father, loves you. He loves holding you in his arms, silently gazing at you as if you were the only one in the world. He loves it that he can call you his child. When you cry, he's there to hold you tight and whisper, “It's okay. Daddy's here.” He even—get this—sings a song for you. The Lord of all sings for us! That's a pretty good reason to be happy in our hearts and sing to him, don't you think?

The King knows what life in the village is like. He knows the grief we feel. He knows the pressures that threaten to overwhelm us. He knows the secret things in our past that gnaw at us and sap us of joy. He knows the hopelessness, the feeling of “Why bother?”

But he also knows that he is greater than all those things. He knows that nothing is able to separate us from his love, which finds its fullest expression in Jesus Christ. He wants us to know that love, so he sends us a message. “Rejoice with all your heart, because I am rejoicing over you.” Amen.