

Zephaniah 3:14-17
Advent 3C Midweek + December 19, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Ed Brandt
"Prepare for His Coming to Bring Us Joy"

Have a holly, jolly Christmas, it's the best time of the year" Do those words describe your view of the season? I'll admit that I tire quickly of the trivial songs that express the secular, worldly view of Christmas. But the old Christmas carol exclaimed, "O how joyfully, O how merrily, Christmas comes with its peace divine." So, however you look at it, these days before Christmas are meant to be a time of joy. Tonight our preparation for the Lord's coming continues as we consider the joy His coming brings. We have lit the pink joy candle in our Advent wreath, and the theme of joy is evident in the readings. God himself is personally involved in this celebration of joy. In our text, He is the One urging the joy as He addresses His people. "Sing aloud, O Daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!"

But perhaps some of you may be a bit uneasy, wondering if all this talk of joy isn't a bit unrealistic. Often the joy of the season is only on the surface. Happiness is supposed to come from the gifts that money can buy. "Tis the season to be jolly" often means overindulgence in food and drink. Excitement is linked with parties and family and social gatherings. But surface happiness and excitement may only mask what lies deep within. Some situations just aren't very joyful. Troubles do come, also to Christians, and the difficulty is increased if others appear to be joyful, without a care in the world. Counselors remind us that people are susceptible to being depressed during the holidays. There is guilt about past failures, regret over actions that caused hurt, sorrow over loss and loneliness, discouragement that the present situation doesn't measure up to our expectations, and fear over what may happen in the future. Tensions rise to the surface and family strife seems to be more prevalent during December. Given these very real circumstances, is God's call for joy inappropriate and out of place?

No! The kind of joy God has in mind is a spiritual joy based on the gift of His Son. That indescribable gift enables us to withstand great sorrows and rise above the most difficult situations. In the Epistle reading Paul encouraged us: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"* The peace of God which transcends all understanding, which triumphs over every earthly circumstance, allows us to have joy, even while we experience earthly frustration, disappointment, pain, and grief.

The outlook for the people of Zephaniah's day looked more gloomy than joyful. In the first part of his prophecy, chapter 1, Zephaniah make a radical proclamation of impending judgment against Judah and Jerusalem because of their idolatry and wickedness. Along with this came a devastating message of end-time judgment for the whole earth. Zephaniah starts out, *"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord."* He goes on to announce, *"For the day of the Lord is near... a day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation."* Like many today, Zephaniah's listeners were complacent and comfortable. They thought sin didn't really matter, that God would overlook their self-centeredness. But God takes sin seriously. There would be immediate consequences for Judah and end-time consequences for all who despise God. In the chapter 2, verse 3, Zephaniah includes just a brief glimmer of hope, *"Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord."*

But Zephaniah makes a great reversal. In the third chapter which includes our text he switches to a message of joy and hope. After how he started out, these words urging joy seem out of place. But even today, although the pronouncement of judgment still stands, we can look beyond that and see that Joy is coming. And it's an unreserved joy. God lovingly calls us "daughter" and tells us to rejoice with all our heart.

Considering the situations life sometimes brings, we might be a little skeptical of all this joy. The people of Jerusalem probably were too. But there is good reason for joy. The greatest cause for joy is that the Lord is with you. God took sin so seriously that he went all the way in

order to overcome it. Not by destroying the world, but first by coming into our world as Immanuel, God with us. The King of Israel, the Savior came, bringing with Him Joy. That joy is ours here and now, for through His death on the cross and victorious rising from the grave, He has taken away our punishment. He has turned back our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. He has swept away the threat and fear of punishment by taking it all upon himself.

When disasters sweep over us and earthly setbacks seek to steal our joy, the question always arises: Why did this happen? The one explanation we can eliminate is that of punishment, for Christ took care of that once and for all. Knowing that the Lord is with us, we can rejoice even in times of trouble. When pain and sorrow and tears are very real, we can look beyond to future joy. The Lord is among us to shelter us and to drive away our enemies. Disasters will come, each one of us is vulnerable while we're in this world, but we no longer fear because the Lord is with us.

Jerusalem is reassured that because of God's mercy, they have a future. After exile will come restoration. But in the NT, and especially when the end of all things is in view, Jerusalem or Zion stands for the Church, all believers in Christ. There is a wider application in the future, one that involves us. The greatest joy of the church is the joy which will be realized on that day, the day of judgment. When unbelievers are being swept away, we will be reassured: *"Fear not, O Zion, let not your hands grow weak."* Weak hands indicate a heart in utter despair, weak in abject terror, totally without hope. At Christ's return those who had rejected the Lord will be melting in fear, but on that day the Lord our God will again be with us, escorting the church into the joyous bliss of heaven. Since we can look ahead confidently to that future joy, we can also live joyfully in the present, even through times of adversity.

Most of the time, our attention is focused on our own feelings. This passage emphasizes that God has feelings of joy over us. That too is reason for our joy. God will rejoice over you with gladness; just like grandparents rejoice over children and grandchildren they haven't seen for months when they first come in the door on their Christmas visit. God will rejoice over you as you rest securely in His care, as you follow Him in obedient faith, and as you bless others with your kindness. The Lord will quiet you with His love, stilling the restless whisperings of discontent and uncertainty. And when you arrive in heaven God will give you a welcome home hug and sweep you off your feet with joyful attention. You will receive a most joyful, tumultuous welcome, a celebration like a sports team winning the World Series or Super Bowl. You are important to God, He sent his Son to earth to bring you the joy of forgiveness and new life. Wait with excited anticipation for the joy He will shower on you on that glorious day.

God's joy is unlimited; there is more than enough to go around. The joy He has given you He also wants others to have. Jesus came to bring joy to the world. He came to seek and to save the lost, those who don't know the joy which comes only through him. In the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin he tells of the rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. You can be a part of spreading that joy by inviting an unconnected or inactive friend or family member to upcoming services so they can hear with you the Christmas *good news of great joy which shall be to all people.*

The Lord is with you. He is your treasure, your joy, your life and light. Joy has come in the person of Jesus Christ. He brings a quiet joy which endures and prevails even during times of trial. And a greater joy is coming on that day when we are ushered into His heavenly presence. So without hesitation I can repeat Paul's instruction, *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"* Amen.