

December 16, 2018 – Zephaniah 3:14-20

What do Advent and Lent have in common? For most Christians today, the two seasons couldn't be more different. Advent is a time of hopeful preparation for Jesus' birth. It's supposed to look happy and cheerful, full of Christmas songs and pretty decorations. While, in contrast, Lent is a time of somber reflection and repentance. A time of fasting and prayer.

And yet, historically, they were virtually identical. Once upon a time, Advent was a penitential season like Lent. A time of somber reflection and repentance. A time of fasting and prayer. In fact, for centuries, it was customary to adorn the church in the same purple paraments and banners as Lent. And the Christmas trees and cheerful decorations didn't come out until Christmas morning, much like the lilies and Easter decorations don't come out until Easter morning.

Times change, of course. But we still have one last vestige of that penitential season in our sanctuary. The pink candle on the Advent wreath. You see, that candle marks the halfway point of Advent. And, lest everyone become overwhelmed by the doom and gloom that filled the seasons, it became customary to take a break from it on both the halfway point of Advent and Lent.

And so that's where we are today. The halfway-ish point of Advent. Gaudete Sunday, as it's known in Latin. The Sunday of Rejoicing. The day when the church of old would take a break from their strict self-examination and embrace the joy of the Lord.

But we don't need all of that, do we? I mean, we don't really use Advent as a penitential season anymore, so such things aren't necessary. Everybody is cheerful and hopeful and full of goodwill for the whole month of December... right?

Well, maybe not. That's the way the world tries to market this time before Christmas. As a time when everyone magically becomes less selfish, less prideful, and overall less sinful. As a time when money problems disappear, relationships are spontaneously mended, and every Christmas party has a happy, Hallmark ending.

Reality can be a little more harsh. Sometimes things do go well. But sometimes they don't. Sometimes the stress to look and act perfect becomes overwhelming. Sometimes the burden to hide the problems in your life becomes unbearable. Sometimes we're desperate to look like a success to those around us, while we feel like a complete failure.

Sometimes Advent only looks cheerful. But under the surface, it's really just as full of sadness and shame as it was back when it was a penitential season. Except that instead of dealing with it in good and godly ways, we deal with it in worldly ways. We try to bury our guilt and sin under greed and self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

The good and godly way to deal with it – the way God has called us to deal with it – is to simply be honest and repentant. To admit that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed. We have broken God's law, misused God's gifts, and dirtied ourselves with uncleanness in every single way.

We're not satisfied with ourselves because there's nothing satisfactory about us. Deep down, we know it. And God certainly knows it. The Bible says that God is disgusted by our uncleanness. He is enraged by our disobedience. He has nothing but contempt and wrath for all our sinfulness.

That feeling of being overwhelmed by our failure in our own eyes and God's eyes is one that the people of Israel knew well. It's one that their exile from Jerusalem forced them to confront. And as they sat in Babylon, mourning their sin, they turned to the words of the prophet Zephaniah.

Zephaniah is not a particularly well-known prophet. He doesn't show up much in our Sunday morning lessons. But we hear from him today, halfway through this penitential season of Advent.

Much of what Zephaniah writes is not particularly joyful. He is one of many prophets who warn of the coming destruction of Israel, and the days of darkness and exile that are coming. He was a prophet who made Israel abundantly aware of why God would exile them to Babylon. And why God was angry with their sin.

But Zephaniah knew something else that they did not. Because Zephaniah could see the joy that comes on the other side of the exile. Such that, even while the Israelites are still deep in their sin and rebellion, he writes this hymn of praise as if he's in the midst of that joyful time after God finishes punishing them. Like he's been transported through time. And is now dancing in the streets with all the returning exiles. With all of God's forgiven people.

*“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies.”*

“I've seen it.” Zephaniah says, “It's as clear to me as if it had already happened. God has taken away his judgment on you. He has forgiven you. And he has let you come home. So rejoice - even you who sit in exile - for there is joy yet to come!”

It's the joy of coming home. The joy of complete forgiveness. After all those years of wondering if God had forgotten them in Babylon, they knew that God had returned for them.

But then, Zephaniah continues. And he says something that doesn't make any sense at all. He says, *“God will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”*

Let me ask you something... do you rejoice in having to forgive others? If someone you love sins against you. If they do something to hurt you, physically or emotionally. Does it give you joy to forgive them?

Do you exult over them with loud singing? “Yes! You hurt me! Isn't this wonderful?! You broke all my rules, but I overlooked it. You walked into my home and tracked mud everywhere, but I cleaned it up. You disparaged my name, but I stuck with you. Isn't this the greatest day in the whole world?”

That we rejoice over God makes perfect sense. His grace and faithfulness is worth rejoicing over. He has done more for us than we can possibly imagine. But that he rejoices over us makes no sense at all.

Unless, of course, he's not looking at our sin. Unless, of course, he's look not at us at all, but at his Son. What does Zephaniah say right before that?

*“The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again feel fear... The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.”*

Zephaniah wasn't just talking about the Israelites' return from exile. He was talking about the birth of Jesus. When the Lord came into our midst, so that we would never again feel fear. So that he could be our mighty one who saves us.

He was talking about the coming of our God and king. Who doesn't just grudgingly forgive our sins, like we forgive so many people in our lives. He doesn't just look past them and say, “Well, that's behind us. Let's not talk about that anymore.” He doesn't just ignore our sin.

He removes it. Like it wasn't even there. He takes it to the cross. And crucifies it. He kills our sin and buries it in the grave.

And when God looks at us, he sees only what his Son has done. He sees only a perfect life of humility and sacrifice. He sees only a person of love who would lay down his life for the world.

When God looks at us, he sees only Jesus. And he rejoices, with gladness. He exults over us with loud singing. He shouts from heaven, *“You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.”*

The world says that we need Advent because we need a time to be cheerful. To celebrate ourselves, ignore our sinfulness, and bury our shame under a facade of parties and decorations. But I say, we need Advent for the opposite reason.

We need Advent because we need a time to be repentant. To be honest about our sinfulness with the God who knows our every thought, word, and deed. And to celebrate the savior who rejoices over us even as he dies on the cross to forgive us.

We need Advent because the only true joy we have in this world is a God who came into our midst and was mighty to save. We need Advent because the only true joy we have in this world is a God who comes into our midst in Word and Sacrament as often as we need him. We need Advent because the the only true joy we have in this world is a God who will come again into our midst, gather us into his kingdom, and restore our fortunes in the resurrection of all flesh. Amen.