

December 15, 2024 – Zephaniah 3:14-20

Zephaniah is not a particularly well-known prophet. He doesn't show up much in our Sunday morning lessons. His whole book is only three chapters long. Buried amongst the minor prophets of the Old Testament with names that are impossible to pronounce like Habakkuk and Haggai. If you've never opened up the book of Zephaniah, you're probably not alone.

Zephaniah also isn't a particularly cheerful book. The message through the first two and a half chapters is one of judgement. Which is kind of odd, considering that today is Gaudete Sunday. The Sunday of rejoicing. It's the halfway point of the Advent season, when we light the rose candle on the wreath and we declare in our Introit and Epistle, *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!”*

But most 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 pronounces a harsh judgment on both Judah and Judah's enemies. He was a prophet who made Israel abundantly aware of why God would exile them to Babylon. Of why God was angry with their sin.

But Zephaniah knew something that they did not. Because Zephaniah could see the joy that was coming 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 that we read today as if he's in the midst of that joyful time already. Like he's been transported through time.

He is past the time of sinful rebellion. Past the time of God's harsh punishment. He's been transported past all of that. And now, even though there's so much yet to come, he's dancing in the streets with all the returning exiles. With all of God's forgiven people.

And so, despite having just preached two and a half chapters of the most depressing sermon you can imagine, Zephaniah suddenly bursts out into song. *“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. You sinned. You deserved judgement. But God has taken away his judgment on you. He has forgiven you. And he has let you come home. So rejoice - even you who still 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, one day they would know that God had returned for them. And if, through those dark days of exile, they clung to this promise, they would have hope in the midst of a hopeless situation. A glimmer of joy to lift the burden of their suffering.

All of that makes sense. God needed to punish them. They had sinned against him terribly. And it would only get worse if he didn't do anything about it. But he didn't want them to despair. After all, he still loved them.

But then, Zephaniah continues. And he says something that doesn't make nearly as much sense. He writes, *“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 trashed the place, but I cleaned it up. You drug my name through the mud, 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. That Zephaniah tells us to rejoice because the Lord has taken away the judgments against us is a perfectly logical and appropriate response to God's mercy.

But that he rejoices over us really makes no sense at all. What have we possibly done that would make God rejoice? We are sinners in thought, word, and deed. We have sinned against the Lord and against our neighbor, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. The only thing that makes us different than the Israelites of Zephaniah's day is that we occasionally realize our sinfulness and repent of it. But no work of ours can take away this guilt.

So what could God possibly see in us that's worth rejoicing over? Well... nothing. Because God isn't looking at us at all. When Zephaniah says that God will rejoice over "you", the person he's speaking about isn't us. It isn't the Israelites. It isn't any sinful person. It's God's Son. It's Jesus. God is rejoicing over Jesus with gladness.

And the proof of that is in the verse right before this one. Zephaniah writes, *"The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again feel fear... Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save."*

You see this whole passage isn't just talking about the Israelites' return from exile. Yes, that's one of the things Zephaniah is writing about. But more importantly, Zephaniah is talking about the birth of Jesus. When the Lord came into our midst, so that we would never again feel fear. So that he would be our mighty one who saves us.

And do exactly what Zephaniah promised. He has dealt with our oppressors. He has dealt with sin, death, and the devil, so that they could never oppress us again. He has cast out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He has eaten with sinners and proclaimed the forgiveness of sins to them. In the work of Jesus Christ, oppression has ended.

Zephaniah promised that Jesus would *"save the lame and gather the outcast"* and *"change their shame into praise."* And he did just that. As he says in our Gospel lesson today, *"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."*

Zephaniah was talking about Jesus. He was talking about the coming of our God and king. Who would restore our fortunes. Not just restore a strip of land in Palestine or a small city in Judah. Jesus would restore the kingdom of heaven. A fortune worth more than all the treasure of this earth.

For, unlike us, he 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. So that 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 you, he doesn't see the sinner who struggles to forgive others. He doesn't see the sinner who chases after the false gods of this world. He doesn't see the sinner who is turned in on himself with selfishness, greed, and pride.

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

And in his joy, he gives you the kingdom of heaven. He gives you eternal life. He gives you a new heaven and new earth. He gives you an inheritance that can never be taken away.

Zephaniah is a tiny book of the Bible, buried amongst other tiny books of the Bible. "A minor prophet" we call him. But he has a great and powerful message. A timeless message, for the people of his own day, for the people of a future day, and for us today. A message that reminds us to rejoice in the Lord because the Lord rejoices over us. Amen.