

## Sermon: Zephaniah 3:14-20

### God's Promised Joy

-A week ago Saturday morning I was anticipating a sermon on peace. And – ironically enough – I was not feeling tremendously at peace about my sermon on peace. I was also not feeling at peace about my progress on my pre-Christmas task list. And I was not feeling at peace about caring particularly well for the persons God has given me to care for.

So draw close, Friends. Let's talk insecurities, shall we? My tendency, as I know you know all too well and wish you did not, is that I get just a wee bit thrown off by all the things. I get afraid of falling down on the job – meaning, all the jobs, not just this one. And then I get overwhelmed. And then I see my shortcomings rising up around me like a haunting hall of mirrors. And then I get to feeling discouraged. And then I begin to dwell on how nice it would be not to be a sinner and a mess while also trying to be a father, friend and pastor preaching on peace. And this is generally the moment when I consider how wise it would have been to become a mailman.

So I was trying to make myself go to a spin class at the YMCA. And I was thinking that I'm not getting to the Y enough for a guy in his 50s. And I was again wondering why they put a spin class at the ungodly hour of 8:15 on a Saturday morning. And I was thinking that mailmen get a lot of exercise while they deliver the mail ...when I got a text from my mother:

'I read your sermon early while things are still quiet. I love all of your illustrations! (helpful exclamation point) I hope the Two by two, red and blue plan is going well in Austin. How wonderful for the lion and the lamb to lie down together! (exclamation point)'

Oh, the power of Mother love! It was like a lullaby of affection to still the downward spiraling. Here were a couple of exuberant exclamation marks from the Mother who loves me to reset my whole perspective. From 'I don't think I'm gonna make it across that line,' to 'I am loved, and God can do something meaningful through messes, too.'

And suddenly, look, I had made it! Here I was at the Y sitting on spin bike. And look, a Song of Tenderness was being sung over me, renewing my hope like endorphins. And look, my task list was incomplete, but rejoice(!), I was valuable anyway. And the adrenaline of hope began to flow as I realized that I was experiencing the divine song of joy that we celebrate today!

-Advent has sometimes been considered a penitential season like Lent. A time of preparation. A time to pay particular attention to the darkness in us that makes us desperate for the light. But some kind soul somewhere must have suggested that whenever disciples of Christ take note of our frail and fickle nature, whenever we take a look at our mess, we believers are swift to listen for the song of God's larger tenderness and mercy. And so in the midst of purple penitence, our tradition has also lit the pink candle of rejoicing.

Today we celebrate the Lord's Joy to sing his promises over us with the renewing affection of a proud parent.

- Our Scripture reading for today is from the prophecy of Zephaniah 3.14-20:

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!  
15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;  
he has turned away your enemies.  
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;  
you shall fear disaster no more.  
16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
"Do not fear, O Zion;  
do not let your hands grow weak.

17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing  
18 as on a day of festival."

I will remove disaster from you,  
so that you will not bear reproach for it.  
19 I will deal with all your oppressors  
at that time.  
And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.  
20 At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the Lord.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Let's pray: Oh, Lord, incline our ears to the song of your affectionate rejoicing. Quiet us in your love. Renew us by your saving presence. And we will rejoice and be glad in You! Amen.

-OK. So no doubt, the prophet Zephaniah gave voice to divine disappointment with a wayward Israel. Because Israel had become insular. They had considered their religion a matter of pedigree and gotten all into their selves and forgotten that the blessing was for their neighbors. And their insularity amounted to their spiraling. And sinking. In sin and conflict and consequences and all of the stinging loss and loneliness to be experienced in the word exile. They had grown distant from God, and they reaped the suffering and sadness of it.

But then – and not by any accomplishment of their own effort – but then, the Lord communicates something stunningly assuring as the exclamation points of his heart.

Did you note the divine initiative, the divine promises? To reverse the isolation of their exile. To renew the fortunes of his people. (Promises we hear as to us also who wait the fulfillment of Christ's return.)

The Lord has taken away his judgments against his people.  
The Lord has turned away their enemies.  
There will be no more fear!  
Because the Lord God has become Israel's true King.

The lame will be rescued from their affliction.  
The outcasts will be gathered into community.  
The shame of sin and self-defeat will be swallowed up in the vindication of God's grace.  
And the home-sick will be brought to their true home.

We could sit in just these affirmations and feel the endorphins. But what's more?! At the heart of this passage is the famous verse. Zephaniah 3.17. You may wish to copy it out and tape it to your mirror.

The Lord, your God, is with you,  
He is mighty to save.  
The Lord will take great delight in you;  
he will quiet you with his love;  
He will rejoice over you with singing!

Zephaniah 3:17, with this single, stunning assurance:

The Lord is not merely near you. He is with you. With you to be for you – actively, tenderly, joyfully working for your good. You are not abandoned, not left to fend for yourself.

The Lord is mighty to save. His presence isn't passive; it's protective and delivering. God has both the willingness and the strength to act. God comes close to rescue.

The Lord will take great delight in you. Meaning not tolerance. Not reluctant acceptance. But delight. God's exuberant desire to enjoy you.

The Lord will quiet you with his love. He will soothe the fear, shame, and turmoil within you by loving you into peace.

And again. The Lord God sings – sings! – with joy, with Mother love, because you belong to him.

The good news? God's presence is not cold or distant. It's overflowing with the warmth of tenderness and affection. For God's people. For me and you.

-Tony Campolo was a sociology professor from Pennsylvania. He was a Christian author and speaker that I heard speak in college. I got to meet him here in Missoula when he came out for an MIC gathering. And as much as I appreciate the position myself, I'm glad Tony wasn't a mailman.

Campolo told the story of how one time he flew out to Honolulu to give some lectures. And because of the time change, he found himself up early in the morning hungry. So at 3 a.m. he found a greasy spoon diner near his hotel.

While he was sitting at the counter, in came six or seven prostitutes who sat on either side of him. He overheard one of the women tell the others, 'Tomorrow is my 39th birthday.' Which was met by biting sarcasm. 'What do you want me to do about it?' replied another, 'Buy you a birthday cake? Throw you a party?' The idea was clearly ridiculous. 'I'm not asking for anything from you,' said the first. 'But why so cruel? It's not like anyone's given me a party my whole life.'

After the women had left the diner, Tony asked the gruff cook behind the counter if the women came in each night at the same time. Tony told him he wanted to throw this woman a birthday party. Surprisingly, the cook grabbed his hands and said 'yes, that's perfect; it's perfect!' The woman's name was Agnes, he said. He wanted Tony to know she was a good woman regardless of what she had had to do to make money. And he said he wanted to make the birthday cake himself.

So the next morning at 2:30 a.m. Tony brought in streamers and a large sign that read 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' The word had gotten out about the surprise so that the whole diner was filling up with prostitutes. When Agnes and her cohort came in at 3:30, the whole place erupted in celebration, shouting 'Happy Birthday!' Agnes stood shocked into quiet, open-mouthed wonder as everyone began to sing for her. A song that everyone seems to sing for everyone. But a song she hadn't heard sung for her. And when the cook brought out the cake and candles, Agnes began to weep.

When Tony invited her to cut the cake, Agnes didn't want to, not yet. She asked meekly if it was ok if she could just go show it to her mother who lived a couple doors down before bringing it back for everyone in the diner. And so she carried the cake ever so carefully out the door, still weeping, overwhelmed with grace, to go and share her joy.

- Friends, maybe you're carrying more than you let on. Maybe the noise in your head feels louder than the world around you. Maybe you wake up already tired, already behind, already unsure of who you are. Maybe you're wandering through a kind of exile—too much of a spiraling mess, or simply too alone. Maybe it's been so long since you've sensed God's nearness that you can't imagine him stepping into your diner to sing a song of affectionate celebration over you.

Tracey and I used to sing Zephaniah's song over our boys as a lullaby. As a reminder in all the shallowness and noise of just Who God is. How little did we know how much more this song would be needed for every step of aging and growth. Maybe you need to hear Your Mother/Father God rejoicing. Maybe you need to trust the divine music, so that you, too, can hold onto the hope that God delights in you.

The Lord, your God, is with you,  
He is mighty to save.

The Lord will take great delight in you;  
he will quiet you with his love;  
He will rejoice over you,  
He will rejoice over you,  
If you could only hear his voice,  
You would hear the Lord rejoice,  
Rejoicing over you,  
Rejoicing over you, with singing!

-In the warm silence that followed Agnes' departure from the diner, Tony Campolo invited everyone to pray. He prayed that Agnes might be set free from the bondage she was in, that her fortunes might be reversed for the joy that God-come-close longed to give her. And when he finished praying, the cook accused him of only pretending to be a sociologist: 'What kind of church do you preach in anyway?' he demanded. Tony responded with merriment: 'The kind of church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.' Laughing, the cook shot back: 'Nah you don't. Nah, you don't. 'There ain't no church like that. 'Cause if there was, I'd join it.'

-Friends, the hope of Advent is God-with-us.

The promise of Advent is astonished joy!

The prayer of Advent is: Come, Lord Jesus.

And the Church of Advent is the one that throws birthday parties for all us prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.

-Let's pray: Come, Lord Jesus. Sing over us with your tender affection. Reverse our fortunes with your astonishing grace. And we will take delight in you and become free to be a church that joins in your song...

Friends, you're invited to come forward to light a candle to offer a prayer for someone who needs the light of hope that the Lord rejoices over them....