

A SONG OF JOY
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Sunday, December 13, 2009

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Last week Rev. Tom York explained that the color of Advent, purple, is a somber color. Not a celebratory color but a color that invites us to pause, to wait, to think, to consider. It's a color that asks us to examine, to turn inward, to turn toward holiness as we await the holy. Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is called Gaudete Sunday. From the Latin "Gaudete" we get the word "rejoice." We lit the pink candle today, called the "Rose Candle" - the color of a rose symbolizing life and joy. We are now past the mid-way point in the reflective season of Advent and today, Gaudete Sunday, invites us to take a respite from the somber color purple and rejoice!

Most of the Advents in my life have been about rejoicing. Especially as a kid, it wasn't about anything somber, frankly. It was about Christmas Day, waiting for that big day to come. Christmas Eve was nice too. We got to wear our new Christmas outfits, participate in the Christmas Pageant at church, receive our gift of oranges, apples and candy canes on the way out, and then go home and open our first gift - new PJ's. But Advent for me in my younger years was really about Christmas morning and all the presents under the tree.

Advent is a season of expectation, of waiting, of preparing. And hopefully in the midst of preparing our homes for parties and relatives, we remember to prepare our hearts for the birth of Christ. We prepare to *celebrate* the coming of God to us in the birth of the Christ-child, but we no longer *wait* for it. Jesus was only born once. The season of Advent encompasses *two comings* of our Lord - the one that has already occurred and the one that is yet to come, the Second Coming of Jesus. In our scripture passage for this Gaudete Sunday the prophet Zephaniah invites us to "Rejoice!" for the Second Coming at hand, the Day of the Lord is near. Today's passage is a song of praise and joy, an oracle from the Lord to the prophet Zephaniah.

While preparing this sermon, I realized I knew little about Zephaniah and that I had very few writings on my bookshelves about this minor prophet from the Older Testament. I asked Rev. Tom York if he had any and to my surprise he had about as little as I did. Tom proclaimed, and I agree, that "Zephaniah just didn't make the Big Hits list!" But I think we *can* appropriately call the book of Zephaniah a One Hit Wonder. Like many people who don't say much, what they do say often carries a lot of weight.

Throughout the short book of Zephaniah, the prophet describes the Day of the Lord, more commonly known to us as Judgment Day. In the Christian tradition I grew up in, Judgment Day was frequently mentioned, along with heaven and hell and who was going where. By comparison, Presbyterians don't seem to talk about this day very often. Maybe we avoid the topic or maybe it simply doesn't even cross our minds. But Zephaniah comes declaring new about the Day of the Lord to Israel and the nations and that this day is on the way. Zephaniah reminds us this third Sunday of Advent what it is we are really waiting for.

Zephaniah was a prophet and a preacher during the time of King Josiah. Josiah was known as the last great and good king of the people Israel and instituted vital religious reform. While Josiah was king, Israel experienced a reprieve from domination by outside empires such as Assyria and Babylon and Israel began to flourish politically and territorially. But religiously speaking they had strayed far away from God and it was Josiah who instituted badly needed religious reform in an attempt to bring Israel back to the one true God.

While the Assyrians ruled over the Israelites, the people of Judah began substituting other deities who were not God, for God. They adopted many of the Assyrian's pagan rituals, including such horrific practices as child sacrifice and child prostitution. The oracles of the prophet Zephaniah served to help institute King Josiah's reforms. Zephaniah delivered nine oracles; today's scripture, "The Song of Joy", from chapter three is the last of these nine. The first eight oracles convey a very different message. The gist of Zephaniah's message is: "God is mad because God is jealous." The idolatry of the people of Judah in Jerusalem has enraged God. Their idolatry has led to self-sufficiency and self-sufficiency has led to the sin of complacency. Chapter 1 verse 12 reads: "The Lord said, 'At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their "dregs", those who say in their hearts that the Lord will not do good nor will the Lord do harm.'" The people attempt a life without God, a life of self-sufficiency. They are complacent. They've come to rely on their "dregs" - they've traded the choice wine in the bottle for the residue at the bottom which cannot help them and cannot love them.

The Reverend Desmond Tutu says: "We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence. We are meant to compliment each other, and all kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental law of our being...." We have a relational God who created us to be in relationship with God and each other. When we make self-sufficiency our God we sever relations with God, with each other, and ultimately with ourselves.

Zephaniah, in the last of the eight oracles of doom, proclaims that God says:

"Wait for me. My intent is to gather all people together on the day I shall come and judge. I am angry, and I will pour out that anger on the people who have left my side. The people who have gone their own way, who have forsaken me, who have abused my people and my creation."

Not much has changed since Zephaniah's time. We are humans still prone to abuse the gift of our free will. We are very willful children. We often choose self-sufficiency rather than accepting God as sufficient for all of our needs and desires, and we're prone to go-it-alone in ways that lead us astray, that separate us from God. We break the First Commandment: Have no other Gods before me. We put other things and people first. We have success, we worship it. Money has brought us some form of happiness, but it doesn't last so we chase after more. Or, we experience failure and in our shame we go into hiding. We try to fix things on our own. We don't ask God for help. We don't ask *anyone* for help. We are not ready to wait on the Lord for directions, because we think we already know what we need.

Our culture teaches us that self-sufficiency is good – that we should be able to do things on our own. And our culture teaches us that we can be and deserve to be instantly gratified. We are accustomed to getting things made to order, and we're used to getting them fast.

Theologian Rob Bell says that *sin* is us saying to God, "I don't like the way things are right now. Sin is when we say to God, 'You're in my seat.'" So we take over, we take the wheel, we start driving by ourselves with no map, only a mission to control our lives, to design it the way we think it should be, sometimes, or often, at the expense of others. Like the Israelites we end up far away from home. At first, we don't realize how far we've strayed or how lonely we've become. And when we finally do, fear sets in. We're afraid of losing the things we've gained, the things we've made. We've achieved our successes by ourselves, we think, so we better keep driving. We keep working hard to hold on to our gains or all might be lost. If we don't, who will? We grip the wheel until our knuckles turn white, our pace reaches a level of insanity. We work, we run, we keep driving.

Like Israel, our self-sufficiency leads to complacency. We exercise EGO, which is a fitting acronym for Edging God Out of our very lives. We forget we need God, we forget we belong to God. We forget we came from God, and we forget that God came to us as a babe, as one of us to live with us. We forget that God is with us right now.

We pay very little attention, if any, to the second coming of God - Judgment Day. We fill up this season - the season of waiting - with activity and it becomes a season of only *preparation*. We prepare to have parties; we prepare to go to parties. We buy gifts to stay in good graces with our friends and family, even if it means spending money we don't have. We're busy during Advent, often right up until Christmas Day, which comes in a blink of an eye because we haven't paused to reflect on what it is we're really waiting for.

Zephaniah reminds us that the Day of the Lord is near. The first eight oracles are warnings of the coming gloom and doom, despair and destruction – they resound with the sentiment of a popular bumper sticker that suggests, “God is coming and She is mad!” Zephaniah has preached to Israel and the nations, “Wake up! You have sinned against the Lord; sin comes with consequences. The Lord is angry. The Lord is angry because the Lord is jealous.”

But now we come to the ninth and final oracle from the Lord to Zephaniah, our scripture passage today. The tone shifts drastically from destruction to restoration, from despair to hope, from a call to repent to a call to rejoice. Zephaniah can preach this final oracle of hope and joy because yes, the Lord is angry and yes the Lord is jealous, but the Lord is angry and jealous because the Lord is love. Because of God's boundless love for all people and all creation, God puts this song of hope and joy into the mouth of Zephaniah, calling him to proclaim to the people, “Do not be afraid anymore!”

God wants the people back. All those whose self-sufficiency and complacency have led them so far away from God, God will bring back home. God wants the people back. God declares through Zephaniah, “You will no longer fear your enemies. You will no longer be oppressed. You will no longer believe your lives are worth nothing. You will no longer be cast out or alone. I will gather you together and Israel and all the nations will declare that I am the Lord. And I, the Lord, will renew you with my love. I will restore you to joy. We will sing.

Zephaniah declares a reversal of fortune for the people. On the Day of the Lord, God will take away the judgment against the people, God will no longer be angry. God will restore life to all. This Day of the Lord is the Second Advent, the Second Coming. This is the day we are waiting for with great expectation and hope. This is the day for which Gaudete Sunday, this third Sunday in Advent, invites us to pause, to consider, to fear not but to rejoice. Gaudete Sunday calls us to shift our focus from adoring the birth of the Christ child to rejoicing that the Lord is coming again soon.

The level of relief Israel surely felt upon hearing Zephaniah's final words is hard to imagine. Many of us in our culture have not experienced the kind of oppression and bondage Israel experienced under the rule of foreign empires. We've not been enslaved, we've not been cast out by tyrant rulers. But we have all experienced fear. What we fear varies from culture to culture, from generation to generation, from person to person, but fear can loom large for each and every one of us.

Zephaniah declares victory over fear on the Day of the Lord! We will battle fear no more as our efforts at self-sufficiency are replaced with complete trust and devotion to the one true God. Thanks be to God for the Second Advent for which we wait, the Second Coming of our

Lord Jesus Christ who promises that through him nothing can ever separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus, the Son of God who has gone to prepare a place for us.

In the popular Christian song “Imagine,” the poet writes: “I can only imagine what it will be like when I walk by your side. Surrounded by forgiveness, what will my heart feel? Will I dance for you Jesus or in awe of you be still? When I stand in your presence, or to my knees will I fall? Will I sing *hallelujah*, will I be able to speak at all? I can only imagine.” We can only imagine what God already knows and proclaims through Zephaniah – that though *we* may be awed into silence by God’s glory when we meet Christ face to face, our God and Lord will exalt over us with loud singing on that day because we will finally be home.

So rejoice, O daughter Zion, rejoice O daughter Jerusalem, rejoice O people of Knox, rejoice O people of the world. Christ was born, Christ has died, Christ has risen and Christ is coming again to take us home. Thanks be to God. Amen.