

## **“Rejoice! The Lord Is in Your Midst”**

*Zephaniah 3:14-20*

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So far as I can recall, no one has ever remarked to me that the book of Zephaniah was their favorite book of the Bible. To the contrary, I suppose Zephaniah is one of the least known and least read books in all of the entire Bible. In checking my own pastoral records, though I have been preaching almost weekly for some fifty years, only on four occasions have I preached from this obscure little book tucked away among the minor prophets.

The prophet Zephaniah preached toward the end of the seventh century B.C., probably near the reign of good King Josiah, a great and reforming king who instituted sweeping reforms in life and in worship in Judah, beginning about 621 B.C., when the book of Deuteronomy was suddenly discovered during a renovation of the temple in Jerusalem. Zephaniah was a descendent of one of the other fondly remembered kings of Judah, good King Hezekiah.

Initially in reading the assigned lectionary passage I questioned the wisdom of such an obscure text for the third Sunday of Advent, but upon further study and reflection the wisdom of the choice seems logical and even ideal. Indeed, I have come away from my study convinced that the message contained in the joyful psalm that brings Zephaniah’s prophecy to a close is about as appropriate and as timely a message as one could ever find, either during this season or on this particular Sunday.

The passage I read a few moments ago from the third and final chapter of Zephaniah is actually a radical departure from chapters one and two of the same book. Zephaniah’s opening chapters could be characterized as words of gloom and doom in which the prophet condemns the corrupt practices and the religious perversions of his fellow Jews living in Judah and Jerusalem. He warns them that destruction is coming from the North, that merchants and traders will be cut off, that the “Day of the Lord” would be a day of wrath and ruin and that it was rapidly approaching.

Do you remember the old television program Hee Haw? Well, if you were looking for a theme song for the opening two chapters of Zephaniah, they might be the late Roy Clark’s rendition of “Gloom, despair, and agony on me; deep dark depression, excessive misery. If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all! Gloom despair, and agony on me.” But then,

suddenly, without warning or explanation, Zephaniah launches into this unexpected and glorious song of God's triumph and God's coming deliverance, a song of salvation for God's people, telling them to rejoice and to sing because God is in their very midst to bless them and to redeem them, a song proclaiming that God will, beyond the time of their judgment, restore the fortunes of his people and the city of Jerusalem. Through Zephaniah the Lord tells them not to fear, not to lose strength or courage. And WHY? Because "the Lord, your God, is in your midst." Despite the darkness of their days and the bleakness of their times, God had not abandoned them and would be with them to bless them.

We too can find a message in this text for this *Third Sunday of Advent*. The winter solstice will occur toward the end of this week. It will be the shortest day and the longest night of the year. But it is when our days are shortest and our nights are darkest, when the winter of our discontent has descended upon us, when despair covers us like a cloud, when grief overwhelms us, when we suffer the consequences of our own or others' misdeeds, when the future appears bleak and the present unbearable — that is when each of us and all of us need constantly to be reminded that the Lord our God is in our midst. He is among us to forgive us, to restore us, and to bless us. WHY? Simply because he loves us and takes delight in us as his children.

We ordinarily speak of this glorious good news in terms of Emmanuel — God with us. True, in the incarnation God came among us in a new and intensely personal way, clothed in human flesh. But let us never assume that prior to the birth in Bethlehem God was not among his people and that after the birth he was. No! From the moment God created the universe and walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8) God never ceased to be in the midst of his people to bless them. Sometimes God's presence was symbolized by a mark, such as the mark placed upon Cain, who killed his brother Able or the mark of circumcision. Sometimes God's presence was symbolized by a cloud or fire, by an ark or angel, by a rainbow or an altar, by a tabernacle or a pile of stones, but the glorious truth is that the Lord our God is always present among his people if they have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts and minds to comprehend.

Ask a lot of young people, and even some adults, what the best things about Christmas is and they may well tell you that it is about the Christmas presents. Well, they are right! It is about presents but not as commonly understood. The Christmas presents that ultimately matter should not be spelled P-R-E-S-E-N-T-S but rather P-R-E-S-E-N-C-E. Christmas is simply the ultimate reminder that God is present with us and for us, and especially so in our darkest and most difficult days. When illness comes, when death seems eminent, when we lose our job or our spouse, when we harm ourselves or others, when debt overwhelms us or our family, or our nation appears to be in peril — then it is that we can stand to be reminded that our God is no less real, no less accessible, no less available, and no less desirous of blessing and using us.

The Lord, our God, is in our midst! Zephaniah knew this and called upon the people to rejoice and celebrate. Isaiah of Jerusalem knew this too about one hundred years prior to Zephaniah. Look at the twelfth chapter of Isaiah in your Bibles (page 641 of your pew Bible). This was an alternate selection from the Old Testament for this Sunday. Although Isaiah has warned his fellow countrymen in Judah that Ephraim's destruction in the North should serve as an object lesson to them, and though they were living under the threat of destruction because of the Syro-Ephraimitic war that surrounded them, he tells them that God is with them. He even uses the term Emmanuel in chapter seven. And then Isaiah closes this section of his book, his memoirs, with a joyful song reminiscent of Zephaniah's invitation to the people to celebrate. Isaiah concludes this section with majestic and hauntingly beautiful words:

*Sing praised to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;  
let this be known in all the earth.  
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

Even though Advent remains a season of solemnity and soul searching, even though it is a time for confession and repentance and for making ready for the Lord's appearance (as I reminded you last week.) Let us never forget that it is also quite rightly a season of joy, intense and genuine joy in the knowledge that the Holy One is already in our midst to forgive us, to restore us, to use us, and to bless us. And for that, none of us need wait until December 25.

If you are especially observant, you may have noticed something different about this third Sunday of Advent, a difference that is reflected in our call to worship, on our Advent wreath itself in many churches today. The Third Sunday of Advent is known liturgically as *Gaudete Sunday*, which means "*Rejoicing Sunday*." On this Sunday in many churches the violet of Advent gives way to a rose-colored candle because the color rose is symbolic of joy while the violet is symbolic of penitence. Joy is always appropriate for God's people when they realize that they need not go in search of God for God is already present among them. And though our penitence is real during this season, it is a penitence tempered with the joy of knowing that God is already present among us and longs to forgive, to bless, and to restore us to himself.

Now some will miss the true joy of Christmas this year because they think it's all about the presents with a "t" or because they look for God up there or out there somewhere. They wait for God to manifest God's self in some miraculous or supernatural way and fail to see that God is as near as the breath we breathe. We occasionally stand on tiptoe in an effort to see his natal star and in the process fail to find him in the helpless babe or in the needy neighbor right beneath our feet.

“An old Rabbi was once asked why so few people were finding God. He wisely replied that people were not willing to look that low. Jesus was born in a stable and God is especially concerned for the poorest, the lowliest, the lost and the neglected.” (from *Liberation of Life* by Harvey and Lois Seifert). My friends, God is always present and often can be found where you might least expect him, even in your own life, even in your own home, even in your own church, even in your own community. So, my friends, rejoice! The Lord our God is in our midst.

Before closing, let me share with you yet another reason for our rejoicing on this day and in this season, a reason beyond the Lord’s nearness. This reason is also found in our passage from Zephaniah today but I will have to confess that it came to me as a new or at least overlooked perspective. It is not a novel idea because it is at least as old as Zephaniah, but I cannot say that I ever fully grasped this insight prior to my study for today’s sermon.

Most of you are a lot smarter than I am so listen carefully as I read verse seventeen again and see if you can hear perhaps another reason for our rejoicing, beyond the fact that the Lord is so near, a reason that had escaped me for too long. *The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victories; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love.*

Did you hear it? It is not simply that God will be victorious, I already knew that. Neither is it that God will renew us in his love. I have known and felt that love for years. But Zephaniah also points out not only that we rejoice over God’s presence, but that God rejoices over our presence with gladness. Fancy that! God is as happy to be with us as we are to be with him. There is mutual delight and I cannot say that I ever really imagined God as rejoicing over us. Of course, it is good to celebrate that God is with us. But now understand that God is celebrating because we are with him! I think I have been more accustomed to thinking that even though some things may occasionally please God, we fall so far short of his will that it is not necessarily joy that he feels in our presence, more toleration I suppose. But not according to Zephaniah, the joy is mutual, and God delights in us even as we delight in God.

If you found yourself thinking when I read Zephaniah’s “Song of Joy” as the New Revised Standard Version puts it, that it sounded somewhat familiar then it may be that you attended the memorial service for Jean King last week. Bob Henderson, her pastor and friend from Charlotte, chose this as one of the scripture lessons for the service. My suspicion is that he had been reading ahead the upcoming lections for Advent. But what a lovely message for Jean’s family and friends and for all of us in seasons of grief and the loss of loved ones. To know that God loves us and revels in our coming to him and sings and exults over us is a wonderful assurance and blessing.

When one of Jean’s grandchildren asked her parents what was heaven like the parent said, “Do you know how when Grandmommy comes over, she gets out of the car, kneels down,

opens her arms wide and you run and give her a hug? Well that is what God is doing for her, opening his arms and letting your Grandmommy run into them, rejoicing over her.”

Zephaniah assures us this is not just wishful thinking. This is the good news of the gospel and the best news of Christmas. God is with us and we are with God. Let us rejoice even as our God rejoices!

Prayer:

On this day and in this season, O God, enable us to sense your nearness, your love and your joy and to join with heaven and earth in singing glory to your holy name for what you have done for us in the gift of your Son, our Savior. Amen.