

December 15th, 2024  
Third Sunday in Advent

Pastor Prieue  
Zephaniah 3:14-17 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup>*Sing, Daughter Zion;  
shout aloud, Israel!  
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,  
Daughter Jerusalem!*

<sup>15</sup>*The Lord has taken away your punishment,  
he has turned back your enemy.  
The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;  
never again will you fear any harm.*

<sup>16</sup>*On that day  
they will say to Jerusalem,  
“Do not fear, Zion;  
do not let your hands hang limp.*

<sup>17</sup>*The Lord your God is with you,  
the Mighty Warrior who saves.  
He will take great delight in you;  
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,  
but will rejoice over you with singing.”*

### **Where Shall Joy Be Found?**

Our sermon text today comes from the book of Zephaniah, the third chapter. Now let's stop right there at ... Zephaniah? If I polled you, I'm going to take a wild guess that there would be very few of you that might remember anything from the book of Zephaniah, other than what you heard in the reading a few minutes ago, or maybe if you happened to read the 3 chapters of the book this past Wednesday in our Mount Olive Bible reading plan. If I wasn't preaching on it this week, I have to admit I don't think my own hand would be up for being able to remember what the book was about.

So today we want to spend some time in Zephaniah, a book we probably don't spend a lot of time in. It's the 4<sup>th</sup> last book of the Old Testament in the string of Minor Prophets that sort of run together, who have tough names like Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah. Yet it's not as if the book is somehow unimportant or irrelevant. It's got a lot to say about living in a society out of control with corruption and violence and idolatry and just plain wickedness.

If you read through these three chapters later today, which wouldn't take very long, what you would notice is that the first 2 ½ chapters are filled with some of the most singeing law warnings in the whole Old Testament—Zephaniah is bringing the heat. Then the last half chapter wraps up the book in a totally unexpected way that answers the question we're asking today on the third Sunday in Advent—a question about joy. Our worship theme said that “Preparing for a real Christmas results in great joy”, but “Where shall joy be found?” as the hymn asks? Zephaniah is going to end with that answer, but we've got some things to cover before we get there. Here's our order today. **1. Rebellion. 2. Wrath. 3. Purification. 4. Joy**

Zephaniah was a prophet at about 640 B.C. during the reign of King Josiah, who might stick in your memory because he was one of the only good kings in a long string of really bad kings in Israel and Judah. Since Josiah did turn out to be a good king, it's likely that Zephaniah was prophesying in early years of Josiah about the sorry shape of things left by his father and grandfather. Josiah became king at the age of 8 when his father King Ammon was assassinated after only two years on the throne. Things were just about hitting rock bottom after Josiah's grandfather Manasseh had reigned for 55 years in wickedness. Listen to his rap sheet. **“He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them. He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, “In Jerusalem I will put my Name.” In the two courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son [to Molech] in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger...more evil than the Amorites who preceded him. 2 Kings 21:2-6,11).** Manasseh the king of Judah was worse than the pagan unbelievers.

Then Manasseh's son Ammon followed in the ways of his father completely and did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He gets killed. Josiah takes over as an 8-year-old, and you can imagine the total disarray of the people who were supposed to be God's chosen people in the city where God had chosen for his Name to dwell. Imagine being one of the ones living there who were still holding out hoping for the Messiah to come? Imagine being 8-year-old Josiah. You go to the temple and the place is filled with priests serving at altars to false gods. You go to the marketplace and people are getting cheated left and right out of their money. You go to the police and they're all dirty cops. You go to the judges, and they've all been bribed and corrupted. People lie and steal and oppress the helpless and sacrifice their babies to false gods and they don't seem to have the slightest fear as they taunt God with their actions **“Who is gonna stop me? God's not gonna do anything about it.” “The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad.”**(Zeph. 1:12 they think. 1) Things were in a state of total **REBELLION** against God.

They were in big-time need of prophets like Zephaniah and Jeremiah to bring a little fire and brimstone. So Zephaniah brings the heat about the Day of the Lord and the destruction that will fall not just on the unbelieving nations but also on Judah and Jerusalem, **“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord... When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth,” “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place, the very names of the idolatrous priests—those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molek, those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.”** (Zephaniah 1:2,4-6).

Zephaniah prophesies not only about the judgment that will fall on the idol worshipers but also on the people for the evils they carry out against each other. **“At the time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, ...who think, ‘the Lord will**

**do nothing either good or bad.’ Their wealth will be plundered, their houses, demolished... The great day of the LORD is near--...that day will be a day of wrath. (Zeph. 1:12-15). 2) Through his prophet Zephaniah, God brings a fiery warning of WRATH.**

Do you know what happens? Mostly nothing! Even when God sends some of their enemies to start carrying this out destruction, as a warning shot, they don’t listen. The city of Jerusalem keeps right on going in its rebellion. **“She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. (3:2)**

But there is this one little group left, that’s kinda scattered throughout the city. They’re hearts are terrified about what’s going on around them, but they’ve been listening to Zephaniah’s call, **“Gather together, ...before the day of the LORD’s wrath comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger. (2:1-3).**

Here Zephaniah is talking to believers, both then and now, believers like you and me, living in the midst of a wicked society, and he pleads for us to make sure we don’t let bad company corrupt us and lead us into the sins of the arrogant and the wicked. Zephaniah calls us to humble ourselves and seek his kingdom and his righteousness before the Lord comes in his wrath.

We do get to see an amazing example of that in King Josiah, one blip on the in the string of wicked kings. In the 18<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, the priest happens to stumble upon the Book of the Law, which had somehow been lost inside the temple. When King Josiah heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes and humbled himself before God and wept and then for the rest of his reign, he proceeded to tear down and burn every shred of idol worship he could get his hands on. He completely cleaned house to purify the wickedness of the kingdom like no king before him had ever done. **“Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength.” (2 Kings 23:25)** The Lord was pleased with his humble servant.

As valiant and noble and devout as King Josiah was, it only delayed God’s judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. God did shelter Josiah from having the destruction happen during his life, as he promised. **“Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to arouse his anger.” (2 Kings 23:26)**

God’s righteous anger against sin needs to be satisfied with justice. So Zephaniah proclaims God’s verdict, **“I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdom and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.” (3:1,8)** This is the point where God is ready to unleash the fire of his wrath on the whole world that’s got it coming and then the strangest thing happens from verse 8 and 9. **3) Out of nowhere, from one verse to the next, the tune changes and the fire of destruction changes to a fire of PURIFICATION. “Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD...On that day you Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from you your arrogant boasters. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill.**

**But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD. (Zephaniah 3:9-12)**

Now don't get me wrong, in purification, the wicked still get burned up and melted, but it's for the purpose of refining and extracting, of bringing out something good! At the beginning I told you Zephaniah was going to answer the question, "Where shall joy be found?" So far, no joy! About all we've been talking about is rebellion and wrath and doom and gloom, but now we finally get to the answer. Amidst all the judgment, God was purifying the people down to just the remnant of his humbled people, through whom he was going to bring Jesus, the Savior of the World, **4)** the good news of great **joy** that would be for all the people!

Where shall joy be found? After 2 ½ chapters of wrath, Zephaniah throws a prophecy Christmas party for the last half chapter of the book and there is joy and singing all around because he's prophesying about the Christ. "**Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel is with you;**" Zephaniah only got to see glimpses of it in the future. But we get to see it in the past, the humble Holy Child born, Immanuel, God with us. The child who grew up and took his place on the cross, where the punishment that was taken away from us was laid on him. The sign above his head marked "the King of the Jews" signaled the one that Zephaniah saw. Yes, the LORD, the King of Israel is with you. And because of it, "**Never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves." (Zeph. 3:16)** He's our Knight in shining armor, the one who sends our enemies packing and also, he's the Refiner, the one "**who gave himself to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Titus 2:14)** And you are the diamond he has refined, the apple of his eye. He has done something good about the bad and has gotten rid of it. And now, "**He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." (Zeph. 3:17)**

**4)** That's where **JOY** is found, in the Lord Jesus who rejoices over his purified people, and then his people rejoice and sing for joy to the Mighty Warrior who has saved them and come to dwell with them. Joy is found anywhere the Lord and his people are rejoicing over each other. That's why we do so much singing at Christmas and it's where we find our joy. If it feels like your joy is waning in these dark December days, be sure to come find and renew your joy in all the true songs of Christmas, as the Lord's and his people gather together to rejoice over each other! Amen.