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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Third Sunday of Advent**

**December 13, 2015**

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## **“Israel’s Joy and Restoration”**

*(Zeph. 3:14-17)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: ‘Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow limp. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love,; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:14-17).*

**COLLECT:** Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah, so he says many of the same things as Jeremiah, namely that Jerusalem and Judah shall be destroyed and the people carried away into captivity because of their wicked life devoid of any repentance.

Let me give you a sampling of the tone and tenor of Zephaniah. Chapter 1, verse 1: “The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah: ‘I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD. I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked.”” Do you get the sense he’s finally had it with these people?

The book of Zephaniah is only three chapters long, 53 verses all told and that’s the way the book goes for all but the last ten verses. Another sample: “The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast . . . A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry. . .”(v. 14).

A number of years later, when Babylon sacked Judah and Jerusalem in 587 BC, the world witnessed the fulfillment of this prophecy. But Zephaniah’s darkest prophecy remains unfulfilled, for it simultaneously points not just to Judah’s end but to earth’s end, judgment day, the Day of the Lord. So Zephaniah’s prophecy is not just for them. It’s for us.

Of course, Zephaniah’s audience in the 7th century BC paid him no attention. Do you think the odds are any better that we will listen to him in the 21st century AD?

Luther wrote, “None of the prophets was ever able even once to persuade this people that God was angry with them. They relied continually on the claim that they were, and were called, God’s people; and whoever preached that

God was angry with them had to be a false prophet and had to die, for they would not believe that God would leave his people. It was then as it is today” continued Luther. “All who teach that the church errs and sins, and that God will punish her, are denounced as heretics and killed” (AE 35:328).

Nothing really has changed. We assume that if things are going well, if there’s relative peace and prosperity in the land and in our lives . . . that must mean God is happy with us. We measure our relationship with God by our prosperity. And we assume that if there’s distress and turmoil in the land and in our lives, surely that means God is punishing us for something we’ve done. In both cases the exact opposite might be true. Though our lives may be falling apart, God may be well-pleased with us, our faith and trust, as he was with Job. And though our lives may be going swimmingly, we may well be testing his patience for our disobedience and unbelief.

In any event, the first three quarters of Zephaniah is hellfire and brimstone. “Repent or else!” But then, in the last half of the last chapter, the tone changes dramatically. It’s from this section that our Old Testament lesson was taken, where the Lord moves from Law to Gospel, from curses to blessings, from confrontation to comfort, from judgment to forgiveness . . . and given what preceded, it tastes all the sweeter. It’s like flourless chocolate cheesecake after your mouth has been fried by a double dare at a Mexican restaurant.

Our text begins with a mandate to “Sing aloud! Shout! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!” Often I hear the sentiment, “So many Christians seem gloomy today and have little joy. For example, they should be smiling as they come back from the Lord’s Supper.” It’s a valid concern. But if you’re like me, you recoil at the tiniest whiff of compulsion, of a forced and coerced approach to joy. For Pete’s sake, if I lack joy – and we all do in one way or another – someone telling me to be more joyful is about as

joy-inducing as a dental drill! Tell me instead why I should be joyful.

That's what Zephaniah is doing for us. He says rejoice and be glad, but then he tells us why: For "the LORD has taken away the judgments against you." You were on death row, but now the DA has dropped the charges, the sentence has been overturned, you are free to go.

"The Lord has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD is in your midst." That's how God took away the judgments against us, by becoming one of us, identifying himself with us and for us, taking on our flesh but also our sin in order to save us. The LORD is with you. God with us. Immanuel. That changes everything.

Every year in the days before Christmas it seems we have a funeral or two. And every time it happens, people mention how difficult it must be for the family to have a funeral at Christmas time. I find myself agreeing, but I also find myself feeling strangely blessed, privileged to put the matter of human death squarely in the context of our most fundamental faith – that God so loves the world that he sent his Son, not to condemn, but to save the world. It's a love that knows what it feels like to be frail and vulnerable and beaten up, a love that knows about sickness, and frustration and betrayal and fear and pain. It's a love that looks the devil in the eyes and does not flinch . . . a love that is victorious over all things, a love that turns back our enemies, and a love that is coming again to take us home.

So, in spite of our circumstance, no matter what, Zephaniah, invites us to sing, shout, be glad! Sounds like the first verse of our Epistle lesson: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Why? "The Lord is with you."

Therefore, in verse 16, "Do not fear, do not let your hands hang limp." One of the things fear can do is incapacitate us. It can take the wind out of our sails. If as a congregation we've concluded there's no real future for the Christian church in North America, that we're on the same rail Europe has been on since the war and there's no turning

the train around. . . if we're convinced the millennials are going to completely drop the ball and by this time in another 20 years there will only be a remnant of the church left in America . . . if that's how we think, you can be sure we won't be doing what God has called us to do. We won't be working to share the grace of the Good Shepherd. Our hands will fall limp.

If, however, we are not afraid of the future, (because God is with us), then we're going to lean in and work all the harder, knowing our work in his kingdom is never in vain, never futile, never meaningless. So "do not let your hands hang limp" Zephaniah writes. The writer of Hebrews put it this way, "Strengthen those feeble arms and weak knees." After all, there's work to do and now is not the time to be giving up.

In verse 17, Zephaniah continues: "He will rejoice over you with gladness." Imagine: that the Holy One will rejoice over us, over you and me. It's nearly incomprehensible. It sounds a lot like Psalm 149:4, which we heard on All Saints' Sunday: "The Lord takes delight in his people." Can you imagine? I know enough about me and enough about you to know his forgiveness must be thorough if he can rejoice over us, and take delight in us. For he knows all and sees all. That he can rejoice over us must mean he has completely removed our transgressions from us, as far as the east is from the west. It makes me think of how Isaiah said it, "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

One of the things I love about my work is the privileged view I have at weddings. Every photographer would love to stand where I stand, and indeed, some have tried. It's just a matter of time before one tries to put a body cam on my stole. The point is, I get to see the bridegroom rejoicing over his bride. To think that's how the Lord looks at us!

Even more impressive, however, are those visits to the hospital, to be with a couple that has been married fifty, sixty, seventy years. When a couple has been married that

long, you know there's history there, not all of it lily white. Knowing what they know about each other, about their marriage, their faults and failures, their quirks and annoying idiosyncrasies. And yet to see husbands and wives dote over each other in the hospital with such care and affection. That too is a perk of the profession.

The church, the bride of Christ has not always given her bridegroom reason to rejoice. Yet, by grace, the Lord looks at his church and loves her. He doesn't have to pretend. She is beautiful in his sight. He rejoices over her. Revelation 21 says she has been "prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." Paul sums up the marriage between Christ and the church saying, "This is a profound mystery" (Eph. 5:32). But "husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her."

Zephaniah continues, "He will quiet you with his love." Think of an infant all worked up, crying hard in the middle of the night, grinding it out. You go in and pick that infant up and swaddle it. You sit in the rocker and nestle the top of his head under your chin, and you soothe and maybe sing a little and, with a little luck, coax him back to sleep. "He will quiet you with his love."

Sometimes we're the ones who wake up in the middle of the night, not unlike an infant, but all our noise is on the inside, our minds rushing ahead, trying to figure out what the worse case scenario will be and then clinging to it, grinding it out. We shouldn't do that. "Do not be anxious about anything" our Epistle says, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Give the Lord a chance. He hasn't bought into the "let 'em cry themselves back to sleep" program. "He will quiet you with his love."

Finally, Zephaniah writes, "He will exult over you with loud singing." Did that register? Normally in the Bible, it's the other way around, right? Normally we're the ones who are to "Sing and make music to the Lord." "Sing to the

Lord a new song.” “Praise him with a loud voice!” Here, it’s the Lord! The Lord “will exult over you with loud singing.” Can you imagine? I can’t. I have no idea what that will sound like. But such is his love and grace!

The first three and a half chapters of Zephaniah is raw, unadulterated hellfire and brimstone. The last half of the last chapter is unbridled, uninhibited Gospel. They belong together. Law without Gospel would make spiritual wrecks of us all. Gospel without Law is meaningless, and would make smug sinners of us all. Law and Gospel belong together. In Zephaniah, the Law is white hot, and the Gospel . . . sweet as honey! Thanks be to God. Amen.

