

Zephaniah 3:14-20 14 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; 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. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." "I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you. At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the Lord.

Luke 3:7-18 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with[b] the Holy Spirit and fire His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

THE PROPHET ZEPHANIAH ISSUES A CALL FOR GOD'S PEOPLE TO REJOICE AND SING TO THE LORD.

GOD IS DESCRIBED AS A WARRIOR WHO WILL DELIVER HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR OPPRESSORS.

THEREFORE, THE PEOPLE ARE CALLED TO TRUST IN AND REJOICE IN THE LORD THEIR GOD WHO SAVES THEM.

THE THEME OF THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT IS ALWAYS "REJOICING".

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO REJOICE IN OUR REMEMBRANCE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH WE WILL SOON CELEBRATE.

WE ARE ALSO CALLED TO REJOICE IN GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND CHRIST'S PROMISED RETURN.

THIS MAKES THE LECTIONARY GOSPEL READING WHICH RECORDS THE SEVERE CRITICISM AND WARNING SPOKEN BY JOHN THE BAPTIST AN ODD CHOICE FOR TODAY.

AFTER ALL, BEING COMPARED TO POISONOUS SNAKES IS HARDLY A MESSAGE THAT ELICITS JOY.

THIS KIND OF ATTITUDE IS HARDLY WHAT ONE WISHES TO ENCOUNTER DURING WHAT MOST PEOPLE SEE AS A FESTIVE TIME OF YEAR.

AND YET THERE IS A CAUSE FOR REJOICING HIDDEN WITHIN JOHN'S MESSAGE.

WE CAN REJOICE BECAUSE THE PROCLAMATION IS GOD IS OPEN TO RECEIVING OUR REPENTANCE.

INDEED, OUR SINS ARE REVEALED NOT SIMPLY TO SHAME OR CONDEMN, BUT TO MOVE US TO SEEK GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

THUS, JOHN ANSWERS THE QUESTIONS OF THOSE WHO SEEK TO CHANGE THEIR WAYS, TELLING THEM HOW GOD DESIRES FOR THEM TO LIVE.

JOHN SAYS THAT GOD WANTS US TO SHOW OUR REPENTANCE AND CHANGE OF HEART BY BEING: GENEROUS, FAIR, KIND, AND COMPASSIONATE TOWARDS OTHERS.

THE BAPTIST SAYS WE SHOULD DO WHAT IS RIGHT IN GOD'S SIGHT, INCLUDING THINGS LIKE DEMONSTRATING LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR.

FOR EXAMPLE- HE SAYS TO GIVE AWAY ONE CLOAK OR COAT, IF WE HAVE TWO, AND TO SHARE OUR FOOD WITH THOSE WHO HAVE LITTLE OR NONE.

THOSE IN OCCUPATIONS OF POWER ARE TOLD TO DO THEIR JOBS WITHOUT ABUSING THEIR POSITIONS, BY SEEKING BRIBES OR MISUSE THEIR POWER, BUT INSTEAD TO SERVE GOD WITHIN THEM.

IN SHORT, HE OFFERS PRACTICAL ACTIONS THAT SHOW OUR CHANGE OF HEART AND MIND. THESE ACTIONS CAN BE REDUCED TO FOUR SIMPLE PRINCIPLES.

WE SHOULD SHARE ANYTHING EXTRA WE HAVE WITH THOSE IN NEED.

THOSE OF US WHO WORK FOR PAY MUST NOT SEEK OR TAKE MORE THAN WHAT WE EARN.

WE MUST NOT BULLY OTHERS WE HAVE AUTHORITY OVER, BUT INSTEAD TREAT EVERYONE FAIRLY.

FINALLY SHOWING KINDNESS AND GENEROUSITY TOWARDS OTHERS PLEASES GOD, WHILE MEANNESS AND GREED DO NOT.

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED MANY THESE ACTIONS ARE ALSO THE KIND OF THINGS EVEN OUR SECULAR SOCIETY SAYS ARE EXPECTED OF PEOPLE DURING THIS TIME OF YEAR.

SOCIETY CALLS FOR GENEROUSITY AND KINDNESS, PEACE AND GOODWILL.

PEOPLE ARE EXPECTED TO SHOW THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT, EVEN THOSE WHO ARE NOT CHRISTIAN.

THIS DIFFERS FROM THE BIBLE, IN THAT GOD'S WORD TELLS US THAT THOSE BEHAVIORS TOWARDS OTHERS ARE WHAT THE LORD DESIRES FROM CHRISTIANS, AND INDEED ALL PEOPLE, YEAR-ROUND.

REMEMBER, THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH US ABOUT THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT BUT THE HOLY SPIRIT.

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE, THE FORMER IS A SEASONAL THING WE ARE SUPPOSE TO HAVE, THE LATTER IS A CONTINUOUS STATE AND THE REAL SOURCE OF IMPLANTING JOY WITHIN US.

JOHN THE BAPTIST REMINDS US THAT PREPARING FOR JESUS, CELEBRATING HIS INCARNATION AND HIS REASON FOR BEING BORN AS ONE OF US GOES BEYOND THE CHRISTMAS SEASON.

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING SEEKS TO INSPIRE US TO INFUSE THE SEASONAL CHRISTMAS SPIRIT WITH THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WITHIN ALL THOSE SAVED BY CHRIST.

THE GOSPEL ALSO CALLS US TO USE THIS TIME OF YEAR TO FOCUS NOT ONLY ON HOLIDAY PREPARATIONS, ON BUT THE HOLY DAYS OF CHRISTMAS, AND GOD'S PROMISES FOR THE FUTURE.

THE BAPTIST CALLS FIRST FOR REPENTANCE- BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT WILL OPEN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS MORE FULLY TO JOY, WHEN WE ARE FORGIVEN AND RENEWED.

IN THIS WAY JOHN'S MESSAGE IS NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM THE WORDS OF ZEPHANIAH.

HE, IN FACT, ONLY DELIVERED HIS MESSAGE TO REJOICE IN THE LORD'S SAVING ACTIONS TO COME, AFTER FIRST EXPOSING THE PEOPLE'S SIN, AND CALLING THEM TO REPENT.

THE MESSAGE THAT PRECEDES TODAY'S READING IS FILLED WITH WARNINGS AND JUDGMENT, MUCH LIKE JOHN'S.

ONLY FOR ZEPHANIAH'S AUDIENCE IT CONCERNED THE FALL OF JERUSALEM AND EXILE OF GOD'S PEOPLE AS PUNISHMENT.

AND YET HE ALSO CALLED THEM TO FAITH AND TO REJOICE BECAUSE WHAT THEY ARE NOW AND WILL SOON EXPERIENCE IS NOT GOD'S FINAL ANSWER TO THEIR SIN.

HE ALSO PROCLAIMS THAT FORGIVENESS AND HOPE WILL FOLLOW JUDGMENT AND PUNISHMENT.

TRULY, RENEWAL AND RESTORATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM IS AT THE ROOT OF GOD'S PLANS.

THIS IS WHY HE CALLS THEM TO REJOICE IN WHAT IS TO COME BEYOND THEIR IMMEDIATE TROUBLES AND FEARS.

OUR PREPARATIONS FOR THE CELEBRATION OF CHRIST'S BIRTH CARRIES A SIMILAR THEME.

NO, WE ARE NOT GOING INTO PHYSICAL EXILE, BUT WE ARE LIVING THROUGH THE SECOND CHRISTMAS DURING A WORLD-WIDE PANDEMIC.

BUT THERE IS A MESSAGE OF COMFORT AND JOY FOR US IN THE MIDST OF COVID, AS WELL AS ANY OTHER DIFFICULTIES OR PERSONAL CHALLENGES WE FACE.

WE FIND THIS MESSAGE MORE CLEARLY IN THE WORD OF THE LORD SPOKEN BY ZEPHANIAH.

THE MESSAGE GOD DELIVERS THROUGH HIM CAN BE REDUCED THREE MAIN PROMISES FOUND IN GOD'S LOVE.

THEY ARE: GOD WILL RENEW YOU IN HIS LOVE, QUIET YOU IN HIS LOVE, AND SOOTH YOU IN HIS LOVE.

NOTICE, THESE ARE NOT SEASONAL PROMISES THAT LIFE WILL BE MERRY AND BRIGHT, OR EVEN JOLLY.

INSTEAD, A DEEPER PROMISE IS MADE THAT GOD WILL SUSTAIN AND COMFORT US IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD.

THIS IS WHY WE ARE CALLED BE A PEOPLE WHO REJOICE, BECAUSE GOD, WHO MAKES THESE PROMISES, IS FAITHFUL.

AN ADVENT DEVOTION OFFERS THIS CHALLENGE TO TRUST IN THE LORD AS CHRISTIANS, SAYING:

“ADVENT IS A TIME TO LIVE AS IF THE LOVE GOD OFFERS US IS MORE POWERFUL THAN FEAR, HATE, OR DEATH.

IT IS A TIME TO LOVE AS IF WE ARE NOW AT HOME IN THE REALM OF GOD; FOR WHEN WE LOVE AS GOD LOVES US, THAT HOME TAKES SHAPE.

ADVENT IS A TIME TO PLACE ONCE MORE OUR HOPE AND OUR TRUST IN GOD.

IT IS A TIME TO OFFER OUR PRAYERS OF PRAISE AND GLORY TO THE LORD OF CREATION AND THE BEARER OF OUR SALVATION.”

PERHAPS IT IS MORE CORRECT FOR US TO THINK OF ADVENT AS A TIME TO BEGIN AGAIN TO LIVE THIS WAY.

YES, ADVENT INVITES US TO BEGIN TO LIVE IN THESE WAYS, SO AS TO MAKE THEM A HABITUAL PART OF OUR LIVES ALL THE TIME, AND NOT ONLY IN DECEMBER.

THIS BRINGS US BACK TO THE MESSAGE GIVEN THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT READING. IT HIGHLIGHTS THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVING PRESENCE.

THE FIRST REASON FOR OUR REJOICING OFFERED IN THE PASSAGE IS THAT GOD HAS TAKEN AWAY HIS JUDGEMENTS AGAINST US AND TURNED AWAY OUR ENEMIES.

THIS IS FULFILLED THROUGH JESUS BY THE FORGIVENESS FOR OUR SIN HE PURCHASED ON THE CROSS.

HIS SACRIFICE ALSO PROCURED THE DEFEAT OF OUR ENEMIES OF SIN AND DEATH THAT ONCE REIGNED OVER US, AS WELL AS THE POWER OF SATAN.

THE SECOND PROMISE IS THE LORD OUR KING, IS IN OUR MIDST. GOD IS A WARRIOR THAT WILL SAVE US AND PROTECT US.

THE LORD WILL ALSO PROVIDE RESCUE AND HEALING, AND WILL GATHER EVEN THE OUTCASTS INTO HIS LOVING PRESENCE.

WE CAN INDEED REJOICE BECAUSE GOD IS WITH US, JESUS BECAME INCARNATE IN HUMAN FLESH TO BECOME ONE OF US, AND TO MAKE US ONE IN HIM.

WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD MAKE IN THE MIDST OF LIFE'S ORDINARY AND EXTRA-ORDINARY CHALLENGES AND TURMOILS?

HERE IS A STORY THAT OFFERS ONE OF THE MANY REASONS WE CAN REJOICE IN THE LORD'S PRESENCE WITH US-ALWAYS EVEN TO THE END OF THE AGE.

IT INVOLVES TRUSTING IN THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST'S PRESENCE CAN MAKE IN OUR LIVES.

A MAN WAS VISITING WITH A GOOD FRIEND OF HIS WHO WAS A SHEPHERD IN TEXAS, AND HE JOINED HIM ONE NIGHT WHILE HE WAS WATCHING THE FLOCK OF SHEEP.

THE TWO MEN WERE RESTING NEAR THEIR FIRE UNTIL THE PEACEFUL SLEEP OF THE ANIMALS WAS BROKEN BY THE HOWLS OF COYOTES.

SHEEP DOGS STOOD UP AND GROWLED AS THEY FACED THE THREATENING SOUNDS IN THE DARKNESS.

THE SHEEP ALSO ROSE TO THEIR FEET BLEATING IN FEAR, BUT THE VISITOR WAS SURPRISED AT WHAT THEY DID NEXT.

RATHER THAN LOOKING OUTWARD LIKE THE DOGS DID, THEY TURNED TOWARDS THE SHEPHERD.

WE HUMAN BEINGS CAN LEARN FROM THOSE SHEEP, WHO RECOGNIZED AND REACTED TO THE DANGER, BUT FOCUSED MORE ON THE SHEPHERD THAN ON THEIR ENEMIES.

THE STORY SERVES AS A REMINDER THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT MESSAGE IS WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THE DARKNESS OF FEAR, OR DANGER, OR SORROW.

TRULY, JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS WITH US AND THROUGH HIM GOD HAS PLACED THE HOLY SPIRIT WITHIN US.

SURELY THIS IS A REASON TO REJOICE IN THE LORD, WHETHER OR NOT OUR PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES ARE PLEASANT.

THERE IS ALSO A PROFOUND STATEMENT IN ZEPHANIAH 3:17 THAT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED, AND IT ALSO CONCERNS THE THEME OF REJOICING.

IT SAYS:" 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...."

WHAT A POWERFUL AND UNEXPECTED MESSAGE IS FOUND IN THAT SINGLE VERSE.

GOD, THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, AND JUDGE OF ALL PEOPLE- DOES MORE THAN SEEK AND WELCOME OUR PRAISES AND JOYFUL SONGS OF WORSHIP.

THE LORD, OUR GOD-REJOICES OVER US! GOD'S LOVE FOR US MOTIVATES HIM TO SING SONGS OF JOY BECAUSE OF US.

AND SO, WHEN WE THINK OF REJOICING TODAY, LET US REMEMBER EXPRESSIONS OF JOY FLOW BOTH WAYS, FROM US TO GOD AND FROM GOD TO US.

LET US PRAY:

FAITHFUL AND LOVING GOD, WE COME TO YOU IN JOYFUL PRAISE BECAUSE YOU CAME TO US IN JESUS, AT WHOSE BIRTH THE ANGEL PROCLAIMED THE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE.

HELP US TO LOOK TO YOU ALWAYS, AND RENEW WITHIN US A SENSE OF JOY IN YOUR PRESENCE EVEN WHEN WE FEEL UNHAPPY OR GRIEVING, FRIGHTENED OR DEPRESSED. IN THE NAME OF JESUS, WE PRAY. AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY: ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 & LUKE 3:7-18

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