

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2015

**Prayer of the Day:** Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of your mighty deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Verse of the Day:** Alleluia! I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia! (Matthew 11:10)

**Sermon Text:** Zephaniah 3:14-16

When you woke up, did you immediately burst out singing (— and loudly at that)? When you were washing up and getting dressed this morning, were you fist-pumping the air, screaming as if you just won a championship? You might have rejoiced at the sight of breakfast, but are you still rejoicing as you think about this week’s deadlines and appointments? Did your heart beat and pump and pound with such excitement that you could not even sit still on the ride here?

Maybe you did not feel those emotions this morning. Maybe those words of singing and shouting and rejoicing did not enter your mind until we read our first lesson. Even after reading those words, maybe you do not really feel a reason to rejoice. After all, rejoicing comes when you are happy— and you are happy when something positive happens, like celebrating a birthday or the birth of a child or Christmas Day. People look forward to those events. Birthdays and births and Christmas presents are not stressful; they are not worrisome; they are not sad. They give you happy, peaceful feelings. Those are the events that cause rejoicing and shouting and singing.

What about those days that are not birthdays or births or Christmas Day? What about saying goodbye to someone you love? How do you feel when the future holds more questions than it does answers? What emotions flood your mind when the nightly news announces ongoing troubles in your world? What about days when life is normal (as usual) and nothing has changed? Or on a Sunday like today, when our Advent focus is “Rejoice!” Do you find a reason to rejoice?

**Zephaniah 3:14-16**

- <sup>14</sup> Sing, O Daughter of Zion;  
shout aloud, O Israel!  
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,  
O Daughter of 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, O Zion;  
do not let your hands hang limp.
- <sup>17</sup> The LORD your God is with you,  
he is mighty to save.  
He will take great delight in you,  
he will quiet you with his love,  
he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Sometimes life does not appear to give you much to rejoice about. Yet, hear the reason **WHY REJOICE TODAY?** God tells you: *The LORD removes your punishment and The LORD is with you.*

Still, it seems somewhat strange to search through the book of Zephaniah in order to find God's reason for you to rejoice. You heard just select verses [in our first lesson]. Those calls to "rejoice!" and "shout aloud!" and "sing!" sound great. Yet, if you page to the beginning of Zephaniah, you hear him proclaim: *"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD (Zephaniah 1:2).* Then God proceeds to lay out a detailed summary about which nation would be destroyed, which individuals will be punished, and how miserable life will be through all of this destruction. Knowing that disaster is coming really does not give much of a reason to rejoice, does it?

The truth of the matter is, there really was no reason to rejoice. It was not that the people could not rejoice because Zephaniah's words of destruction hurt their feelings. Rather, when God looked down from heaven and saw how his people were behaving, he found no reason to rejoice.

The people God had rescued from Egypt, led through a divided Red Sea, guided through a desert, and delivered into a new land— they were not thanking him for what he had done. Instead, they thanked a little cow-shaped god called Baal. They prayed to the stars, asking the generic "universe" to bless them. They were bringing their little children to worship a god called Molech. This statue was a big clay jar shaped like a man, with a wide open mouth and a crackling fire in its belly. Then God's own people would toss their living child into its fiery belly ([1:4-6](#)). How could God be happy with those actions? How could God rejoice that sinful hearts reject his forgiveness?

When you look at the words of our sermon reading—Rejoice! Sing! Shout!— and you compare them to Judah's coming destruction, there really does not seem to be a reason to rejoice, does there? I am not talking about how life on earth would get worse— and neither is Zephaniah. You see, this call for you to rejoice stems from something deeper than just when life on earth is good.

Let me ask you this: What if there was no such thing as Christmas because no Christ ever arrived? What if you drive to this building on Christmas Eve and the doors here were locked, lights were off— in fact, there is no tree no decorations, nothing Christmas-y here? You did not sing "Joy to the World" or "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" or "Away in a Manger" because no baby slept in the manger? You did not hold those bright little candles because Jesus the Light never entered the world? Would you still find a reason to rejoice? Would you rejoice knowing that you still stood at odds with a God who is already in heaven? Would you rejoice knowing that God declares you forever cut off from his love because you have disobeyed him? Would you rejoice knowing that imperfection has more in common with the devil than it does with God?

Zephaniah makes that point abundantly clear. Sin separates people from God. Yet, God takes on flesh and enters this world in order to give you a reason to rejoice! He enters a world just like ours— a world filled with death and broken promises and uncertainty. He meets people who are blind and mute and deaf and sick. He heals their

ailing body, not for the sole purpose of making their earthly life more comfortable. No, he heals them so that they might see him as the One who heals their standing before God. He sits at deathbeds. He weeps and mourns with the family, not because he hopelessly wonders if the loved one is in a better place. No, those tears remind you how Jesus comes to reverse death, how he will open eyes again and makes the brain to function and lungs to again breathe in oxygen and hearts to pump blood. He sees injustice, oppression, persecutions that afflict believers. Yet, Jesus comes to give you eternal happiness.

See, your Savior knows the many things that you experience in this world. Yet, he does not come only to make your life on earth a better place; he comes so that you can enter heaven and your life can be perfect! On the cross he cleanses our hearts from imperfection with his perfect blood. He does all this in order to take away your punishment.

Did you catch the reason **WHY YOU REJOICE TODAY?** Because **The LORD has taken away your punishment.**

Knowing that you will not spend eternity in hell is the reason why you could ever begin truly rejoicing in life. That is why God tells you: **Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!** God uses the words: "Jerusalem," "Zion," and "Israel" as a name for every believer; he uses those words to describe your citizenship in his kingdom. You rejoice, not because you are forced to, not because wants you to ignore life's troubles. You rejoice because you are at peace with God! Rejoice because God has kept a promise to forgive you! Rejoice because heaven is your home! **WHY REJOICE TODAY?** Because *The LORD removes your punishment.*

Notice, you do not merely rejoice because one day off in the distant future you will enter heaven. God does tell you heaven is filled with eternal rejoicing, but he gives you a reason to **REJOICE TODAY!**

He tells you: **The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you.** Think of what kings do. They lead people by issuing decrees. They protect with armies and castle walls. They manage economies in order to provide for their citizens. If your king takes away the fear of harm and lack of food and uncertainty, how do you respond? You rejoice because your king satisfies every need!

Right here, Zephaniah calls God your King! So, God tells you: **"Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp."** We live in a world filled with fear. When we reflect on our sins or we look around at a scary world, we feel that fear. Remember, **The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.**

God does not say that life will be perfectly happy at all times and that you will never experience trouble. Sometimes you wake up and feel anxious from everything that demands your attention. When fear about the uncertain future hits you, go to your King in prayer; God is with you. Know that he sits on his throne for your benefit. Hand over your concerns to him. Trust in his power to answer them. Be quieted by his gentle whisper, "I have everything under control."

Sometimes your family fights and argues and holds grudges. (Sometimes they blame you as the reason for the unrest.) Remember that your King is strong to save you. Ask him

to help your patience grow and to use words to build up and calm down; ask him to share his powerful peace.

Sometimes you may feel alone, abandoned, forgotten by friends and your own family— at the mercy of the world’s events. Look up to the clouds and know that your God has not forgotten about you. In fact, he rejoices over you! How do you know God is still with you? How do you know he still watches over you? Because he gave you a Savior from sin. If he does not care about you, then why would he give his only Son to an innocent death for your benefit? Why would he send Jesus to open heaven for you? Why would he send Jesus to take care of a need that only he could fix? Why would he bother giving you the status, the identity of “At peace with God?” He willingly does all this because he loves you.

That is the reason **YOU REJOICE TODAY!** *Because the LORD is with you.* When troubles press into you, look up and see God’s love already giving in the manger, on the cross, and outside of the Easter tomb. Look at your baptism and his Holy Supper where he repeatedly assures you of his forgiveness. Look at his love as he speaks to you through his Word.

Rejoice! Not because he commands you. Not because you have to ignore the pressing troubles in life. Rejoice that you are not abandoned, left without answers to life’s greatest questions. Rejoice that your King is with you!

Today we lit the third candle in our Advent wreath. It is the rose-colored one, that one which stands out from all the others. Do you remember what it is called? You could look inside the bulletin and see that it is called the “Candle of Joy.” You could look up on our banner and see that pink square with big, bold letters: “REJOICE.”

Yet, our rejoicing is not that Christmas is closer and we can open presents. We are not rejoicing because we choose to put a pleasant picture on unfortunate, sad problems. Your rejoicing is fueled by something far greater. Your rejoicing comes because God made a promise to you and he kept it. He did not forget to send Jesus. He did not choose to let you figure out a way to earn his favor. No, he did precisely what he promised and sent your Savior into the world.

Does that give you reason to rejoice today? or tomorrow? or next week? or when you sit at the dinner table only to see an empty chair around your family? or when you see your family, but they no longer talk to you? or when you turn on the news only to see more violence, more tension, more questions than there are answers? Are you rejoicing today?

Yes, troubles may enter your life. Yes, emotions may run deep. Yet, as you walk through life, lift up your eyes to the cross and see your King remove your sins. See your King remain with you. **WHY REJOICE TODAY?** Because *The LORD removes your punishment and the LORD is with you.*