

Sermon – December 13, 2009

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A Song of Joy

Zephaniah 3:14-20

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout I Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” Zephaniah 3:14

As we move further into the Advent season, we hear today the words of an ancient prophet of Israel, the prophet Zephaniah. His prophecy was given during the reign of King Josiah who brought positive reforms to the life of the nation of Israel.

These reforms were necessary because Josiah followed the reign of the king Manasseh who, according to the words of the book of 2 Kings “did much evil in the sight of the Lord.” When you read more closely about Manasseh’s reign, practices such as worshipping the false god Baal, participating in child sacrifices, and consulting mediums and wizards were just some of the practices which led God’s children away from their faith in God. No wonder there was a need for reform.

As we read this beautiful song of praise from Zephaniah, it is a reminder of how much songs and music are a part of our Advent experiences. Many of the songs are beautiful and stirring such as the wonderful musical presentation offered by the choir last weekend, the much loved music of Handel’s Messiah, or our favorite carols and songs of the Christmas season. Some of the songs are ones we endure year after year like Alvin and the Chipmunks or “Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer.”

Songs have always been a common way for us to express the joys and challenges of the human experience. We share songs at times of happiness and sadness, experiences of both joy and sorrow. Zephaniah’s “Song of Joy” is no different – it is a song for the children of Israel that is filled with expressions of praise at a time that was filled with many problems for God’s children.

There were problems within the faith community of God’s children. Zephaniah refers to them earlier in his prophecy: *“I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, and the name of idolatrous priests; those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens; those who bow down and swear to the LORD but also swear by Milcom; those who have turned back from following the LORD, who have not sought the LORD or inquired of him.”* (Zephaniah 1:4-6). The people of Israel, covenant partners with Almighty God, were either worshipping other gods or participating in their sacrifices, or they had simply given up following the Lord altogether! This is certainly not cause for singing songs of joy!

In addition to these problems among God's children, there were problems coming from the nations surrounding the people of Israel. Zephaniah speaks of them as well: *"I have heard the taunts of Moab and the reviling of the Ammonites, how they have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory. Therefore, as I live says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my nation shall possess them. This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they scoffed and boasted against the people of the LORD of hosts."* (Zephaniah 2:8-10).

A song filled with praise at a time filled with problems: Zephaniah is God's reminder to his people that God has not forgotten them. As they turned to God in the face of these challenges and problems he would enable them to sing a song of joy celebrating God's plan to bring them deliverance.

Fast forward 600 years or so in the history of the people of God. In many ways things have not changed. It is still a time filled with many challenges for God's children: they are living under Roman rule which some see as a mixed blessing at best, but others see as a disaster. After all, the Pax Romana did offer the benefit of peace to a small nation like Israel, but it came at the price of losing freedom and independence to be who they wished to be.

Luke tells us Herod was the ruler over the Galilee region of Israel. Herod was a troubled and disturbed person, always fearful of anyone challenging his authority. He would stop at nothing, including the murder of members of his own family, to make sure his kingship was allowed to continue. No wonder the Gospels tell us that when Herod was bothered by something so was everyone else!

There had been a positive development over this period of 6 centuries: God had promised his children a Messiah would come to bring light to the world and to fulfill the longings and desires of Israel for peace. But the centuries had passed, no prophets had spoken in 400 years, and no Messiah had yet arrived.

Until that night in the little town of Bethlehem just south of Jerusalem. Songs of joy sung by angel choirs rang out across the hillsides occupied by herds of sheep and their shepherds. They carried the news of an anointed one, a Messiah, who had been born and could be found if they went to look for him. It must have been hard to accept such good

news when they had been disappointed so many times before, but they took the angels at their word and went to Bethlehem, and the rest is history!

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Finally the children of Israel could hope for Zephaniah's promises to become reality. The anointed one would come and God's blessing would be with them. Little did they understand how true that promise would really be? Perhaps we even don't fully comprehend the scope of the Messiah's mission for us today. Zephaniah talked about the Lord's judgment being taken away – the Messiah would do battle with human sin and bring forgiveness and salvation. Zephaniah offered a song of praise in the face of real problems.

The Messiah would sing songs of rejoicing over his lost children filled with gladness at God's promises finally being realized. He would renew the covenant relationship with Israel and refresh the love that had grown cold over time. And, as Zephaniah affirms, this anointed One would come to save those who are lame, to reach out to and gather those who are outcasts, and to turn their shame and heartache after all these years into joyous songs of praise!

Let's fast forward again from this celebration in the hills of Bethlehem say, oh, 2000 years or so...to a community of people in southeastern Michigan. It has been a privilege and pleasure to visit with some of you this week in restaurants or homes around our community. More visits will happen this week and others as well in various groups and settings in the months ahead. I have listened to stories of your life and faith journeys, stories filled with blessings and challenges unique to each person.

We live in a different place and time than those Zephaniah ministered to and than those shepherds in Bethlehem. Just like them, however, we long for God's song of joy to be heard in our lives as well. In this Advent season we sing our songs of joy as people facing a time filled with challenges and problems, just like those of long ago.

Advent, the birth of Jesus Christ, is God's Joy Song over us – God rejoices over us with gladness in spite of all our inadequacies and shortcomings: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In Christ, God renews his love relationship with us day by day as we open our hearts and lives more fully to his love. And, through Christ and through us, the Body of Christ known as the Church, God is working to address the challenges and problems we face: working to heal that which is broken, to find that which is lost, to gather in those left as outcasts, to resist oppression and establish justice until the day of Jesus' 2nd Advent someday in the future.

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“Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.” (Zeph. 3:16) Each of us has at least one challenge on our minds and hearts this Advent season, something causing us some sense of fear or heartache, leaving that knot in our stomach and causing us to want to just sit down and give in. Offer that one challenge, that one problem, whatever it may be, to Christ in this Advent season: a broken relationship, a personal battle with sin, a financial burden or employment need, a fervent prayer for some form of oppression or injustice to come to an end. Offer that thing to Christ, the Messiah, today and during this Advent season, and see how God will choose to sing his song of joy into your life and situation for his glory and honor! AMEN.

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