

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Advent 3 – December 13th, 2009

Zephaniah 3:14-17

“Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of 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, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the greatest titles given to the Lutheran church is that we are known as “the singing church.” In Martin Luther’s day the hymns and the liturgy weren’t usually sung by the congregation, but mainly by the choirs and ministers, because everything was in Latin. Luther understood that the hymns and liturgy belonged to every Christian. So he translated the worship service and wrote hymns in the language of the people, giving them back the important privilege and responsibility of participating in church.

I think most of us would agree that today we are still the “singing church.” Just listen to us as we sing our hymns and psalms each Sunday. Just listen as our choirs sing their songs of praise. But oddly at this time of the year, the thought of singing and rejoicing seems to waver a little, even for Lutherans. I can already see some faces, what do you mean Pastor? It is the Christmas Season, we are all happy aren’t we? Oh, I don’t mean that we’ve stopped being the singing church because many of us admittedly don’t know a quarter-note from a “Quarter Pounder” I mean we’re not the singing church today because we’re at a time of year enough when some of us feel least like singing. The streets and malls are jam packed with inconsiderate people, and we’re angry. A loved one’s place at the table will be empty this year, and we’re lonely. Illness has decided to invite himself over, and we’re blue. “I’m tired, stressed out, run down, and out of patience,” you say. “I feel like crying or growling but singing? Not this Lutheran!”

Well don’t look now but the prophet Zephaniah is about to put the ‘rejoicing’ back in our lives. So far in his short book he has given Israel nothing but reason to sing “the blues”. He has preached nothing but hellfire and damnation to God’s rebellious and thick-headed people. But right as Zephaniah is about to finish his book, the tune changes dramatically. The Lord is coming to purify his people. In this promise, Zephaniah saw God break every one of Satan’s tackles and run down the field for the winning touchdown against sin and hell. Zephaniah can’t contain himself. He jumps up and down and calls us to join him: **Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!** People of St. Luke’s Lutheran Church ...

Sermon Theme: Rejoice With All Your Heart

- 1. The LORD Has defeated the enemy**
- 2. The LORD has taken away our punishment**

A believer’s heart bubbles with joy when he sees evidence of God’s victory. No doubt, that was true of Zephaniah at hearing God’s promise to purify his people. At this time he could see signs of that promised victory. He could see God’s Spirit stirring in the man who was likely his cousin, young King Josiah. Zephaniah wrote about the time when 16 year old King Josiah “began to seek the God of his father David” in the words of the writer of Chronicles. Within ten years Josiah would institute reforms in Israel like no king before him ever had and no king after him ever would. Not one idol would be left standing. Supporting Josiah were the prophet’s Zephaniah and Nahum on his right and Jeremiah and Habbakuk on

his left. What a sight: five faithful champions gearing up to storm the gates of hell with the clear and untainted word of God! Surely, the Lord *is* coming to purify his people. So **“Sing!” “Shout aloud!” “Rejoice with all your heart!”**

But that bubble of joy in a believer’s heart can burst when Christ’s victory isn’t so obvious, when all the signs seem to spell “defeat.” Josiah’s reforms weren’t as successful as he had hoped, because they didn’t penetrate the people’s hearts. Zephaniah and the other prophets would preach God’s Word until they were blue in the face, only to have the people respond, “Quit your preaching. Stop telling us that God is going to destroy us for our sins!” It’s demoralizing! Stop telling us we need to repent. It’s inconvenient. Stop telling us that Messiah is coming. It’s a pipedream. Where’s the glory? Scripture shows how the joyful hearts of the prophets deflated at times. Listen to the song Jeremiah sang after Josiah’s death: **“I am ridiculed, everyone mocks me; the word of the LORD has brought me insult all day long” (Jeremiah 20:7,8).**

Tell you what, I don’t always feel like singing with all my heart. My heart deflates at times. I know yours does too. A sin you thought you had licked comes back with a vengeance and wipes the floor with you. You feel like all you did was kick out one demon and tidy up the house for seven worse ones to come in plop, down in the sofa of your heart, and make a mess of your conscience. Maybe you strive to live your faith. You know someone you love needs to hear the truth of God’s Word. You’re determined to say something. With a prayer you take a deep breath and nothing comes out. Fear got the better of you again. Or maybe you say, “This broken relationship has gone on long enough. Today is the day I fix it.” Again, you pray. You search God’s Word for the words to say and the strength to say them. You speak. But tempers flare. And the divide just gets wider. You’ve failed God. You’ve failed yourself. You don’t want to sing. You want to check into a room at the Hotel “Pity Me” lock the door and pull down the shade.

“Sing?” “Shout aloud?” “Rejoice with all our hearts?” I know ‘tis the season to be jolly” and all that, but how can we sing when we fail to be all that God made us to be? How can we sing when Christ’s victory doesn’t seem real for us? Good thing we follow the Christian church year. It gives us a big hint. There are two Sundays in the Christian calendar telling us specifically to rejoice. One is the 4th Sunday in Lent. The other is today, the 3rd Sunday in Advent. Isn’t it interesting that the calls to rejoice come smack dab in the middle of seasons marked by the serious mood of repentance? Why is that? Perhaps to remind us that the reason for our joy isn’t found in what we feel and see but in the beautiful truth coming from the mouth of our God through Zephaniah: **“The LORD has taken away your punishment.”**

Dear people, let’s all check out of Hotel “Pity Me” and let’s sing with all our hearts, not because there are kids jingle-belling, and everyone telling us, “Be of good cheer,” but because we’re all innocent before God, every last one of us! The Lord Jesus has tossed out of God’s court our sentence of hell. When God looked at us and said, “Will the defendant please rise?” Jesus put his pure and yet unwounded hands on our shoulders and said, “Stay seated.” He stood up in our place, Father and Son looked at each other. Their eyes welled up with tears of joy at the thought of our rescue. God said, “Son, I find you guilty for their sins.” And those beautiful hands of Jesus remained pure but no longer unwounded. Nailed to a cross, Jesus gobbled up *our* death and *our* hell. And when he walked out of the mouth of the grave, Christ showed that he had chewed up and spit out the guilt that caused it all. In Christ God no longer sees us a failure and an enemy but a dear child. Look at how he addresses us through Zephaniah: **“Daughter of Zion,” “Israel”, “Daughter of Jerusalem.”** That’s you. That’s where you stand with God because Christ has removed every spot of guilt!

In the words of Paul I say, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** The Lord Jesus has removed your guilt! That means he has removed the wedge that separated you and me from God. And that gives us another great reason to sing when we’re blue. “Sing your hearts out!” Zephaniah says!

One of the most important truths we will celebrate on Christmas is that God is with us. In a very real sense that’s what Christmas means. Matthew tells us that when Jesus was born he fulfilled what God had promised through Isaiah: **“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”--which means, “God with us.”** “God with us” is such an important truth to latch onto and celebrate because without “Immanuel” we could only live in fear. Without Christ our King we

could only leave our problems in our weak, sinful, dying hands. Without baby Immanuel every disaster and heartache we face would only be a taster of hell. Without Jesus we could only receive all of God's blessings in life like all unbelievers do, without gratitude, adding to our guilt on Judgment Day. But the virgin gave birth. God came to us and did everything, so that no matter what we can sing: *'Be still my soul. The Lord is on your side.'*

With God by our side and on our side we *will* not be afraid. Zephaniah says, **“never again will you fear any harm.”** That's true not because we no longer face the fearful enemies of death and Satan, but because they have Christ's boot-print on their necks. With God by our side we will live unafraid, not because he will spare us from sickness, pain, and frustration, but because he changes their names. For us they are no longer called harmful but beneficial. Thanks to Jesus they are no longer punishments. Now we can say, The God who sacrificed his Son is giving our faith a work out to make it stronger. The God who rescued us from this doomed world is breaking our ties to it. The God who came near is coming again and soon we will awake to a new day when we will never have to look again into the face of the things that make us afraid. We will live unafraid in life, not because God is with us as our “friend” around whom we can throw our arm, as if we are on equal terms, but because God is with us as our ever-present King and Savior. Through faith in Jesus we are Israel. Zephaniah says to us **“The King of Israel is with you.”**

With God by our side and on our side we can keep working for him. **“Do not let your hands hang limp,”** Zephaniah tells us. When you hear this I want you to have this picture in mind: after 70 years of being captives in Babylon, the people of Judah have returned to Palestine. They're excited. They start going to work rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Before long they're surrounded by some big bullies. “You better stop your construction or else,” the bullies said. The people's heads drop; they relax their grip, letting their tools fall to the ground. Got that picture in mind? Well, don't be that way! Since your King is with you, don't let anyone, even family intimidate you from standing for and speaking the truth. Since God is with you, don't let someone's words or actions make you so bitter and angry that you're afraid to release the unearthly fragrance of forgiveness because they started it. You let go. God is with you. He'll take care that every wrong done to you is righted because he takes care of you. Since God is with you, don't let someone's loveless criticism or ingratitude make you afraid to keep serving and loving and doing so with a smile. God is with you. He's smiling. That's all that matters.

Dear people, the Lord remains by your side! Keep singing your hearts out! Today Zephaniah has assured us that the Lord has removed our guilt and so the Lord remains by our side. Since those truths won't end when the tree comes down and the decorations get put away, let's rejoice, let's rejoice our hearts out! Amen!