

December 12th, 2021

Zephaniah 3:14 -20 “As It Is and Will Be”

This week’s text is from the minor prophet Zephaniah. We preachers refer to Zephaniah as a “table of contents” book. That means you don’t just flip to it. You’ve got to look it up in the table of contents because it’s only three chapters long and it’s buried in the middle of a bunch of other hard-to-pronounce prophets. The specific passage that the lectionary gives us this week is all about restoration and rejoicing which is perfect for “Joy Sunday.” But be thankful that we’re just getting the last seven verses of this book because if we started from the beginning we’d be hearing about devastation and global catastrophe. Chapter one starts out with, “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth.” Thankfully, we’re dealing with the end of the book this week, so we get to hear about the joy that is to come *after* the undoing of creation.

Here's some background that might be helpful to understand what’s going on here. The prophet Zephaniah worked with Josiah who was the fifteenth King of Judah which was the southern portion of what used to be the

United Kingdom of Israel. Israel split in half after King Solomon's reign and remained divided until they were conquered by the Babylon Empire and deported to Babylon's capital somewhere around 586 BC. Most of the kings were clueless about what God wanted from them and had no desire to unite again. Only a few of the kings "got it," and Josiah was one of them. Josiah was one of the last kings of Judah in power before the Babylonian exile. He was in the middle of instituting reforms that would restore the divided kingdom and "get right" with God. Zephaniah was a prophet whose job was to inspire King Josiah to turn things around.

Unfortunately, Josiah's reforms were too little too late, and everything fell apart. So what we've got this week is a passage that celebrates what's coming. But what's coming is a hostile takeover that leads to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which by the way, is the center of worship and practice for the whole Jewish faith. That does *not* sound like something *anybody* ought to be celebrating! True. But Zephaniah is a celebration of *anticipated* joy ... joy that is yet to be seen.

Let's take a break here and talk about the last twenty months, shall we? You might be saying, "No, Jesse, let's *not* because the last 20 months has been a monumental goat rodeo." I agree, but I still think we need to talk about it. I'm not always comfortable with comparing major historical events to current events. For example,

there are some who say that the struggle for LGBTQ rights is like the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Say that out loud and you'll get pushback from both sides saying, "No it's not." Are there similarities? Absolutely, and both sides will agree that's the case, but it is *not* the same. It's like saying that the current COVID-19 pandemic is like the 1918 Spanish Flu. Are there similarities? Yes. But they are *not* the same. So keep that in mind, and show me a little grace because I'm about ready to compare the last 20 months to the Babylonian Exile, but there's a method to my madness.

In 586 BC the king of Judah and many of the leaders in the land were conquered, uprooted and deported to the Babylonian capital for 50 – 70 years. In March, 2020, a virus caused a worldwide shutdown of commerce, education, government, supply chains, private industry, a variety of institutions and dozens of other things that I don't have time to mention. What do these two events have to do with each other? In both cases the affected people had feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, grief and loss, helplessness and hopelessness. For this sake, I think the prophet Zephaniah has a message that is applicable to us today in the 21st Century Common Era in the same way it was applicable to the captive Jews in the fourth century Before Common Era.

In a nutshell, Zephaniah's message to King Josiah and the people of Israel was, "Catastrophe will overcome the kingdom, but then the people will be restored to their land." That's his message. Zephaniah's theme though is, "What will save us from the wrath to come is knowing that God is in our midst." We're just not there yet. But it is coming. And we know that it is coming because God promised it would.

I think this is a timely message because it speaks to those of us who feel like we're in some kind of limbo as far as the pandemic is concerned. We're not quite living in a post-COVID world, but since we've been having in-person meeting options, and we've seen some restrictions being lifted, it *does* seem like things are getting back to normal (whatever that means.) I was in a meeting with our regional minister yesterday and she said, "We may not be in a post-COVID world, but I think we're in a pre-post-COVID world. Either way, there's still enough uncertainty that we're not sure if there will *ever* be a truly post-COVID world.

You ever hear a Bible verse that isn't in the Bible? Sure you have. We all have. We hear them all the time. Ministers joke that these verses come from the Book of Hezekiah. But wait, there was a *King* Hezekiah in the Bible right? True, but there is no *book* of Hezekiah. We just figure it's another table of contents book that's

hidden among these minor prophets we've been studying. The kinds of verses we find in the fictional book of Hezekiah are ones like, "God helps those who help themselves." Or, "God will not give you more than you can handle." Or, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." Or, "God works in mysterious ways." We think they're all in the Bible, but they really aren't.

The one I hear the most is, "This too shall pass." Believe it or not, this saying is *not* in the Bible. That doesn't mean it's not true though. In fact, "This too shall pass" is a pretty decent summary of the Book of Zephaniah. In Zephaniah's case, the thing that will pass is the calamity and destruction mentioned in chapter one. If something is going to pass though, what will be there to take its place? A different kind of calamity perhaps? Something new has to come in order to replace the old. What will it look like? Not knowing is stressful! Anyone who has waited for a test result or a diagnosis or a verdict knows what this feels like. Newness is scary. But the prophet assures the listener, that whatever it is, it's something to celebrate! Better still, no matter *what* is coming next, you won't have to face it alone.

A lot of churches are going through times of uncertainty right now. They don't know whether they're in the beginning, middle or end of the seemingly multiple crises that are going on at the same time. The "great

resignation” that’s been hitting so many businesses over the course of the pandemic has been affecting churches too. People are dropping out and not coming back. The Barna institute has discovered that there’s even an uptick in clergy and church staff resignations over the course of the pandemic. And before you go there, it has nothing to do with nobody wanting to work because the government will pay you for staying home. It has more to do with a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. It has to do with a lack of direction. Leaders are feeling like they don’t have anything in their bag of tricks to address something as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous as this pandemic. That’s why I said earlier that you can’t always compare experiences from the past to what’s going on in the present. We can’t say, “Well, this is just like the 1918 Spanish flu, so all we have to do is use 1918 solutions to solve our 2021 problems. That’s why we need to turn to Zephaniah and other prophetic sources of wisdom.

Because what we learn from Zephaniah is that whatever is coming next – wrath, plague, war, famine – no matter what it is, it is not the end of the story. There is still joy and celebration that is coming. The prophet also makes it clear that what is coming is God’s doing. Look at the verbs in this passage – God is delighting. God renews. God exalts with songs. God gathers. God will deal with tormentors. God will rescue. God will make. God will

bring. God will restore. Over and over again we see this pattern: Rescue – Gather – Restore. And it's all in this present tense that God delights.

God the warrior is named here ... the warrior who has victory. God the King of Israel is mentioned here too. But God who exalts and sings is here too. And the idea of God singing *with* us is a powerful image. When you think about what worship and praise is, which we covered last week, we are the ones who are supposed to be singing. We are the ones who sing praises to God, but here Zephaniah reminds us that God sings with us. That is a remarkable image. What a celebration this is! This is good news ... this is great. A lot of times we read through these prophetic texts during Advent and it feels like a lot of "doom and gloom," but here we're reminded that it's not all about wrath and destruction, but renewal and repentance and turning back to God.

It's not a message of damnation, but a message of invitation. What God longs for us is for that return, for that joy, for what Jesus calls "life abundant." It's good news, not bad news. And I think sometimes we forget because we get caught up in some of the gravity of these prophetic texts that we forget that what God desires isn't wrath and destruction, but renewal, repentance and turning back to God. What God wants is for us is to sing with God and for God to sing with us. And that, my

friends, is what we're going to do next week in our music service!