

Grace Lutheran Church 40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
December 12, 2021: Third Sunday of Advent
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Zephaniah may be a minor prophet, but to my ears what we heard today is one of the most jubilant expressions of joyful hope in all Hebrew scripture. Which is why it's perfect for the third Sunday of Advent. Like most Old Testament prophets, Zephaniah spends most of his capital on shocking poetic imagery making clear how people have strayed from God and what the consequences are going to be. Zephaniah especially has no patience for the religious leaders:

"I will stretch out my hand and cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the 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 idols, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who have not sought the LORD or inquired of him."

But all lament must yield to praise. because God always remains faithful. So here at the close of this book Zephaniah points us toward the fulfillment of God's kingdom through the coming of the promised Messiah, in an exhortation that describes the nature of all our worship:

"Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart!"

Today though I want to focus on a verse that often gets lost all this joyful exultation. Verse 17 reads:

¹⁷The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will quiet you with his love.

He will quiet you with his love. Why do we need to be quieted in the midst of rejoicing? Because there is even more noise around us that is trying to drown God out, to push God out of the picture, to willfully ignore God just as the idolatrous priests were doing.

Even in the strongest faith communities there is a question that always hangs heavily in the air: How can God let bad things happen? Where was God in this weekend's tornadoes, whose victims included third shift workers whose lives, as their shift alone suggests, were already filled with struggle? Or nursing home residents whose lives were already marked by loneliness and loss? Where is God when bright young lives cut are short by unforeseen events that never should have happened? Where is God in that one wrong step and fall that changes the entire outlook of a life? Where is God, and how can God let those things happen?

We find the answer in prayer. Not the kind of prayer where you ask God for things, but that in which you sit quietly and open your soul to him. *He will quiet you with his love.*

Opening our soul to God is a journey of discovery into our true identity. God knows everything about us so there's no point in pretending. We come into prayer not only as the person God created us to be but in full view of what we have done with that life, what choices we have made and what the consequences of those choices are. This is why we begin worship with confession, to remind ourselves what this feels like. Every week we come knowing we desperately need forgiveness, and always receiving it, we gain a deeper understanding of God's love for us. "Even with all that, I am still loved and forgiven?" we wonder in amazement. The answer is always Yes.

This very human experience is the starting point of prayer, the cultivation of our relationship with God, and goodness knows, the world needs more prayer.

Knowing that God loves us, unconditionally, quiets our fears and sets us free from any number of demons who, literally, attack us on a daily basis. I speak from experience. The demons of low self-esteem who whisper in your ear that you're not good enough. The demons of isolation who crow that you are too busy to strengthen and renew friendships. The demons of pride who keep shouting that your personal agenda is more important than the well-being of others. The demons of doubt who try to convince you that there must not be a God at all with the world is going to _____ in a handbasket.

These demons are real. The good news is that if you start to pay attention you can see them coming and give them a good kick in the opposite direction. I can also tell you from experience that they do not like this, and may come at you even harder the next chance they get.

He will quiet you with his love. God, of course, does not let bad things happen. They just do. Our invitation is to find God in the face of his Son who weeps with us through the world's calamities and promises to never, ever leave our side.

We receive this invitation by entering into prayer. Just five minutes of sitting with God each day, wherever you can find a sliver of silence in your schedule, can make all the difference in the kind of fruit our lives can bear. Is your fruit going to be like that of the poor pear tree in our back yard whose branches drooped low under the weight of hard little fruits that never grew or ripened? Or will your fruit ripen to be joyfully shared among hungry souls?

In our Gospel reading John exhorts us to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." In opening ourselves honestly before God, and receiving anew each day the assurance of his never-ending love and forgiveness, we bring the experience of this relationship into our lives as a community. This is how God's kingdom will come, one act of prayer, one assurance of hope, one expression of love at a time.

Amen.