

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Third Sunday in Advent
December 15, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Sing, Shout, and Be Glad!

Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem. ¹⁵ The LORD has removed the judgment against you. He has turned back your enemy. Israel's king, the LORD, is in your midst! You no longer need to fear disaster. ¹⁶ In that day Jerusalem will be told, "Do not be afraid, O Zion. Do not give up. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you as a hero who will save you. He takes great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing."

¹⁸ I will bring back those among you who grieve over the loss of the appointed feasts, those for whom the loss was a burden and a disgrace. ¹⁹ Look, at that time I will deal with those who mistreated you. I will rescue the lame and gather together the scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you in. At that time I will gather you. I will give you a name and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, declares the LORD.

—Zephaniah 3:14-20 EHV

One of the great traditions of this time of year is to gather together with family and friends and sing Christmas carols. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we gather to sing songs. Choirs practice and explode with exuberant joy through song. Singing is such a powerful expression of joy. In fact, in our lesson for today, the prophet Zephaniah says, "**Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem!**" The prophet was encouraging the people to **sing, shout, and be glad.**

But what if you are having a hard time doing that at this time of year? What if you don't have much to sing about? What if you received some unfavorable news from the doctor? What if you said goodbye to a loved one? Yesterday I stood next to the grave of Troy Pautz. And it just hits you when you see someone close to you lowered and buried in the ground. Is there a reason to rejoice even when sadness is in your heart?

The prophet Zephaniah says "yes." But his reasons for rejoicing aren't what people would typically look for. If you were living at the time of Zephaniah, you might wonder how his message can cause rejoicing. If you were walking down the road and saw Zephaniah heading toward you, what would come to mind? Would you see Zephaniah as God's proclaimer of joy or would you see him as a bearer of bad news? Would you long for the message he would bring or would you run the other way?

I ask those questions because the message that Zephaniah received from God and needed to share with the people was not always a happy one. In fact, Zephaniah's words are some of the most graphic and horrible descriptions of God's judgment because of sin.

Zephaniah has some very descriptive words about the Last Day, Judgment Day. For example, in chapter 1, God says through the prophet, "**I will completely sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the LORD. ³ I will take away man and beast. I will take away the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea and the stumbling blocks of the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the LORD.**" Not very pleasant thoughts, are they?

It's almost the opposite picture of creation. When God created the world, he filled the world with created beings. Here Zephaniah pictures the opposite. God will take it all away. The only thing that will be left is a barren wasteland. Zephaniah's message was one of destruction.

Sometimes God uses these pictures of Judgment Day to give glimpses of what will happen in this world. We know that the great Day of Judgment will happen when Jesus returns on the Last Day. But Judgment Day also happens when a person dies. When death comes, a person faces the Lord for judgment.

God used pictures of judgment to describe various events against his people. For example, when the Babylonians came into Jerusalem and destroyed it, God used that as a picture of judgment. And the truth is that many people faced their judgement day when they died.

Zephaniah proclaimed these pictures of judgment through his book. Also in chapter 1, Zephaniah wrote, "**The great Day of the LORD is near. It is near and coming very quickly. Listen! The sound of the Day of the LORD! The cry of the warrior is bitter. ¹⁵ That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and total destruction, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶ a day for the ram's horn and for the battle cry against the fortified cities and against the high towers. ¹⁷ I will bring distress upon all people, so that they walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD.**"

I'm going to stop there in reading chapter 1 because God actually gets quite graphic when he describes the judgment. It's an eerie picture of judgment and death. Read through it sometime. The book of the prophet Zephaniah is only three chapters long, but most of it is doom and gloom.

But it's important for us to contemplate that. Why would Zephaniah paint such gloomy pictures of judgment? The answer is because of sin.

If you remember these times of Zephaniah 2600 years ago, Jerusalem was the place where God had set up his temple. It was the place where he showed that he was among his people. This was the place where the Word was proclaimed and taught. This was the place where the sacrifices were made for the people's forgiveness. This was the place where God intended his people to gather and **sing, shout, and be glad** over their relationship with him.

But instead of treasuring those gifts from God and instead of relying on him for everything in their lives, the people turned away from the Lord. Some turned to false gods. There were people in Israel who worshipped a false god called Baal. Idol worship took place among God's people. They put their trust in this fertility god. They depended on Baal for the crops from their fields, for the calves from the cows, and for the children from their wives. The hope and trust of their future was placed in this false god who would fill their bank accounts and give them a sound economy. The people cast the Lord to the side.

Some of the people didn't bow down to Baal, but they were just as guilty. They became indifferent to the Lord. These were people who grew up in a God-fearing home. They had been taught to trust in the Lord and serve him. They knew what God wanted for their lives. But these people got caught up in their day-to-day lives and in the world around them. Pretty soon they found that they didn't have any time for the Lord. Nor were they interested in making time for him. Oh, maybe they would show up at the temple occasionally, perhaps once or twice a year at some of the high festivals, but the Lord simply played no role in their daily lives. They didn't seek out his Word, nor did they study it or apply it to their lives. They seldom, if ever, sought the Lord in prayer or bothered to thank him for his blessings. Their jobs were secure. They were making a good living. And they did not see a strong need to be involved with the Lord and his Word.

So, God announces judgment against sin. God is serious about sin. These aren't just mistakes that we make against God every so often. No. These are rebellious acts against our holy God. As the Creator of everything he deserves all of our praise, honor, and glory. It is his right to have it because of who he is. But we have been there with the people of Zephaniah's day. We are guilty of the same sins. We've worshipped other gods in our lives. Maybe not openly like the Baal worshippers, but in our hearts we have. Whenever God's children place their trust and sense of well-being in bank balances, retirement planning, insurance policies, a sound economy, and the like, the spirit of Baal surfaces. Whenever the Creator's *gifts* become the foundation of confidence rather than the *Creator* himself, we worship a false god. We are idol worshippers whenever we put God on the margin of life. Whenever we are too busy with other things to make time and take time for God, we're no different. Zephaniah speaks his words to us as well.

And so, we would deserve the same fate. We would deserve the same judgment. We would deserve to be in the midst of wailing and howling as we are cast away from God forever. My friends, we need to recognize that. We need to recognize our sin and what we deserve because of our sin. Because only then are we ready for some joyful news. Only then can we rightfully rejoice in everything. Only after we see what we rightly deserve because of our sins outlined in Zephaniah chapter 1 can we be ready to hear what God has in store for us in Zephaniah chapter 3.

“Sing out, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you daughter of Jerusalem!” Why can he say that? Why can you sing? Why can you shout aloud with joy? Why can you be glad? Listen! **“The LORD has removed the judgment against you. He has turned back your enemy. Israel's king, the LORD, is in your midst! You no longer need to fear disaster.”**

That's the reason we can always rejoice. Many of you attended the funeral of Troy Pautz yesterday. Pastor Pautz has told the story of a conversation he had with Troy a few weeks before he died. He asked his son, “Are you afraid?” Troy couldn't speak, but he could nod or shake his head, and he nod his head “yes” to that question: are you afraid? Pastor asked a few more questions, “Are you afraid of being paralyzed?” He nodded “yes.” Are you afraid that you won't be able to work anymore? He nodded “yes.” Are you afraid that you will have a lot of pain? He nodded “yes.” Are you afraid of dying? He shook his head, “no.”

Why could Troy indicate that? Sure, the future is unknown, but why could he have such confidence that when he dies, he has nothing to fear? Because of words of promise like we have here. Instead of punishment for our sins, the Lord has given us a gift. He is in our midst. He is with us. That gift was a one of a kind. That gift was priceless. That gift came wrapped in swaddling clothes. That gift came as a baby. A baby. No fear and terror in a baby. That gift was God's only Son. And as God's Son, Jesus removed our punishment forever when he came into the world. He took our sins to the cross. He buried them in the tomb. And our punishment is gone forever. Just savor that news for a second. Our punishment is gone forever.

Oh, doesn't that news just ring with joy? You will not die. Oh, maybe physically, yes. But that death has now become a sleep. Troy is just sleeping, at least his body is. He's actually celebrating. But Jesus calls the death of a believer like a sleep. You do not have to fear waking up from that sleep to the righteous wrath of God. That punishment is gone. It's gone. Jesus took it for you. Now what do you have to look forward to?

Listen! **"The LORD your God is with you as a hero who will save you. He takes great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing."**

I don't know if we really treasure these words enough. I know I don't. Do you realize that the LORD your God is dancing through the heavens and skipping through the earth singing songs of joy over YOU? God who has the power and might to completely send us away from his presence forever, is rejoicing over you with singing.

Doesn't that just reveal to you how God sees you? He delights in you. Your heavenly Father delights in you because he sees you covered with the righteousness of Jesus his Son. Psalm 139 does not exaggerate when it says of our God, **"He has thoughts for you more countless than the grains of sand."** If you ever feel sorry for yourself or down in the dumps, just take a walk along a beach, okay? And then start trying to count the grains of sand, and then remember that the Lord has thoughts for you, thoughts of love, more countless than the sand. God is singing love songs to you. To you!

At this time of year, we sing many wonderful Christmas carols and hymns. Just think of all the great music that has been written for Christmas. We're going to sing a lot of them in the next couple weeks. It's rejoicing.

But none of that music that we humans have composed and written can begin to compare to the song the angels sang the night Jesus was born. Even that music is secondary to the music of the beautiful songs the Lord sings to you because you are his dear children.

You have heard those songs. You have heard God sing his songs to you. Lyrics such as ... "Your sins are forgiven. You are my child bought with the price of my Son's blood. I have written my name on you with water and my Word. I give to you my body and my blood for the forgiveness of all your sins. You are mine and I am yours. My bride, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

What does that message do for you, my friends? It brings joy! That doesn't mean you always need to have a smile on your face. No. We have sadness at times too. But joy isn't found in the happenings around us. Joy is found in an objective statement of what God has done for you. Joy is found in Jesus. And that means we can always have joy. Or as Paul said it in Philippians, we can **"rejoice in the Lord always."**

Therefore, we sing. We sing God's praises because the Lord has taken away our punishment.

We shout. We give a triumphant cry because the Lord has turned back our enemies.

And finally, we are glad. We are glad because the Lord who has come and will come again has promised that he will never leave our side. Jesus is coming. **Sing, shout, and be glad!** Amen.