

The Prophet Zephaniah and a Vision of Joy in Sorrow
Zephaniah 3:14-20
December 15, 2013

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. The sorrows for the appointed feasts I will remove from you; they are a burden and a reproach to you. At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the Lord.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Once there were two seminary students who were in the same homiletics class; a class on preaching. Sometimes their professor wished that class would never end because of the way these two men interacted in that class.

Brent had worked for Disney. He possessed amazing creativity. As Brent listened to the texts of Scripture, he could imagine worlds of God's grace. He would invite people into the halls of God's kingdom and they could hear the walls resounding with joy.

Frank had worked for the opposite of Disney. He had worked for Death. Well, he didn't actually work for Death, but he worked in places where Death had done his work. Frank had been a homicide detective. One day, Frank brought in a photo album to class. It was the kind of photo album most people would never see. It wasn't full of pictures from a Disney family vacation. It was full of dead bodies.

Frank had taught a course on wound identification (you thought your job was bad) and these were pictures of bodies with the wounds he helped people identify. As much as Brent imagined life; Frank revealed death.

Watching these two interact with the word of God was interesting. The professor liked to play the two off of each other. When Brent would help the class imagine life, fill their minds with the dreams that God has for his people, Frank would wake them up and bring them back to reality, a world of suffering and death. When Frank would imprison the class with the harsh reality of sin and God's judgment in the world, they could always turn to Brent for an escape.

The professor had a great time in that class and as much as he didn't want it to end, he's glad it did. Because, if it hadn't ended, none of the students would be prepared to

preach from a text like today's from Zephaniah. You see, what was happening in that class was the students were beginning to pit joy and sorrow against one another.

Frank gave them sorrow; Brent gave them joy and the students were starting to think of faith as a matter of joy without sorrow. As if joy was the absence of sorrow. As if we can't rejoice, we can't celebrate Christmas, as long as there's sorrow in our lives. And yet that's not how God would have us prepare for Christmas. God doesn't ask us to clear all sorrow from our lives in order to have Christmas joy.

During Advent, God invites us into a classroom of his own. He invites us into the words of Scripture. During Advent, God confronts us with stories of people. People who have joy. But it's not joy in the absence of sorrow. God shows us a peculiar joy, a holy joy, an Advent joy in the lives of his people. In these stories, God reveals joy in the presence of someone who comes to us in the midst of our sorrow.

Consider the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul writes to the Philippians and tells them: "*Rejoice in the Lord always*" (Phil 4:4). Wonderful encouragement, but Paul writes these words from prison. For most people, prison would not be the place to be talking about joy. If joy were the absence of sorrow, then there would be no joy in a letter from prison. But God asks you to see the peculiar joy of Paul. Though his hands are chained, his heart is free. Paul knows that joy is not the absence of sorrow. Joy is found in the presence of the Lord who is with him in the midst of his sorrow.

Or consider John the Baptist, sitting in prison, waiting to be executed. He sends messengers to ask if this Jesus is the one who is to come or if they should look for another. And Jesus sends John's messengers back with a song of joy from Isaiah.

If joy were the absence of sorrow, this would be a cruel joke. But Jesus knows that joy is not the absence of sorrow. Joy is found in the presence of someone who comes to you in the midst of your sorrow. So, Jesus sends John a message that brings hope in midst of John's suffering. The same thing is happening in today's from Zephaniah.

There doesn't seem to be much sorrow when you first read this text. Reading these few verses can bring thoughts of the world of Disney. Joy is ringing and running around the text. But this text is only a few verses from the book of Zephaniah and if you read the whole book, you'll find it's nothing like this text.

Reading the whole book of Zephaniah is a lot like paging through Frank's photo album. It's full of dead bodies. Zephaniah had vision of divine destruction. The dead are scattered everywhere. The book opens with the grand sweep of God's judgment. God says: *I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. I will sweep away man and beast, I will sweep away the birds of the heaven and the fish of the sea. . . I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth* (Zeph 1:2-3).

The grand sweep gives way to particulars. God judges everyone, the priests and the people, the rulers and the merchants, the warriors and the laborers, and like a

nightmare God continues to judge late into the night. Zephaniah sees him, wandering around with a lantern, seeking even more people to destroy.

The dead are scattered everywhere. Perhaps the most horrifying vision is when God prepares a sacrifice in the midst of the nations. Since his people have abused the sacrificial system he gave them, God enacts his own sacrifice. Only this time, the victim sacrificed on the altar isn't a bull; it's his own people. He places his people on the altar and sacrifices them, as the nations gather and watch in horror.

At the end of this horrifying vision, we have this one small picture of joy. If we only look at the small picture, we can easily envision joy without sorrow. Yet Zephaniah's joy is not joy without sorrow, it is joy in the presence of one who comes to us in the midst of our sorrow.

Here, we could learn from Frank and do some wound identification. What do we learn about God from the wounds he has inflicted? First, we learn that God rules over all nations. His judgment extends to all social classes, throughout all nations, and lasts for all time. You cannot get away from it.

Second, we learn that God's power is overwhelming. No one can resist him. He is the one who creates and he is the one who destroys.

Third, we find that God is present with his people in the midst of judgment. In that most horrifying vision of the sacrifice of his very own people, we get a glimpse of God with us in Christ.

God is fully present with us in the midst of his judgment. Jesus is Israel reduced to one person. He is the one body sacrificed on the altar, bearing the eternal punishment of our sin. Here, we see that God will not leave his people alone in his judgment, but he comes for them in the midst of his judgment.

Jesus is the one who bears the Father's wrath for us. He becomes the sacrifice that takes away our sin and he is the presence of God in the midst of our sorrow. His death is not the reluctant death of someone who begrudgingly gave his life. Instead, it's the mystery of joy and sorrow joined for eternity in the relationship of the Father and the Son.

The Son in joyful sorrow offers his life for you. The Father in sorrowful joy receives you on the arms of his dying Son. And when that Son rises and ascends into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, he still bears on his body those wounds. Father and Son in joy and sorrow joined together forever for you. And now the Holy Spirit works through God's word to bring the presence of God to you.

That's what Zephaniah is singing about at the end of his book; the joy of the presence of God with his people in the midst of their suffering. Zephaniah proclaims: *The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty hero who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He*

will quiet you with his love (Zeph 3:17). God will rejoice over you with gladness because all judgment is taken away. God will quiet you with his love because nothing can separate you from him. Zephaniah invites us to see joy and sorrow together in the eternal love of God.

This might be hard to understand, but this is a timeless truth. God's church is a place where there is joy in the presence of one who comes to us in the midst of our sorrow. As God gathers us, there are joys that we celebrate. The birth of a child. A positive response to chemotherapy. There are sorrows we mourn. A divorce. A grandmother developing dementia.

These joys and these sorrows are brought before God in prayer. And through his word, God brings us Jesus. He has come to create a place where all people and all nations gather before him. Why? Because he has taken away divine judgment, and now rejoices over you with gladness and quiets you with his love. This is God's gift of Advent joy. Not joy in the absence of sorrow but joy in the presence of Jesus who comes to you in the midst of your sorrow. And the joy that he brings, like the wounds that he still carries, is a joy that will never end.