

Title: Dare to Imagine God's Song

Advent 3, North Star Mennonite, Dec. 12/21

Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Main Idea: Zephaniah's wondrous hymn of surprising redemption calls God's people to rejoice wholeheartedly, even as God rejoices over us with singing.

Purpose: To encourage the congregation to dare to imagine what it would be like to experience God singing over them with delight. To challenge the congregation to trust that God is as good as God's song over us suggests.

Introduction: God's Song: The book of Zephaniah, like most of the other minor prophets in the Bible, is relatively unknown by many Christians today. But if we know anything about Zephaniah, it's the wonderful hymn of joy which ends his prophecy. This makes it an appropriate reading for the third Sunday of Advent, with its traditional theme of joy.

Zephaniah's hymn begins with a stirring call to worship, inviting the people of God to sing aloud, to shout out, and to rejoice wholeheartedly, without reservation, holding nothing back, for God has come into the very midst of God's people, God has come with healing love, and God has poured out so much grace upon the people that they never need to fear evil again. Surely the climax of this joyful outburst is verse 17: "God will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

My title for this message, "Dare to Imagine God's Song," comes directly from today's Advent worship material. The title says it all—do we have the courage to imagine God delighting in us, and singing over us with gladness? What if we actually dared to imagine that we ourselves brought such happiness to God's heart that God burst out into a loud and joyful into song? It would be breathtaking enough simply to hear God singing—what would God's voice sound like? But to think that we ourselves are the reason God sings—isn't that overwhelming?

In order to help us better understand why God sings over us, it might be helpful to consider those times when we sing over each other. I remember singing lullabies over my infant children. I remember church congregations singing over young people as they entered the waters of baptism. I remember my family gathering around my mother on her deathbed, and singing hymns as she passed. In each of these cases, the singing was an expression of love. We sing over those we love. We sing in order to communicate our love. And is it not the same with God? Can we dare to imagine God singing a love song over us?

Perhaps this language makes us uncomfortable because it's too intimate. Zephaniah's poetic hymn takes us out of the comfortable realm of intellect and reason, and confronts us with the realm of feeling and emotion. To think that God's heart swells up into song over us might bring us into a territory in which we seldom walk. In fact, we might think that this news is too good to be true. Perhaps we could imagine God singing over someone else, but over me, and over us? It's

easy to throw up the protest, “We’re not worthy of such a song.” And so our own egos might get in the way of our experience of God’s joy, our egos which want to prove ourselves worthy of God’s love, rather than receive it as a beautiful gift.

Context: Gloom and Judgment: How can we answer such an objection, that we are unworthy? Well, if we truly want to understand God’s song, we need to put it in context, which means we need to know more about the rest of the prophecy of Zephaniah. The call to rejoice has a reason; it’s not fabricated out of thin air. Having started by reading the hymn of joy, we might be surprised that the rest of the book, everything that precedes the hymn, is full of doom and judgment; it contains some of the gloomiest passages found in the entire Bible. Now, Zephaniah ministered during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, following the disastrous reign of evil King Manasseh. In the aftermath of Manasseh’s reign, who ruled as a cruel tyrant, Zephaniah is almost driven to despair. The people of Judah committed idolatry, their political leaders were corrupt, their religious leaders were faithless, violence was epidemic, and the citizens of Jerusalem oppressed the poorest and the weakest among them.

There is one condemnation in Zephaniah’s prophecy that I find particularly striking. Zephaniah does not only denounce obvious and blatant sins, like murder or fraud or theft. He also refuses to let off the hook those people who remain complacent to the suffering around them, those people who say, in chapter 1:12, “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.” In their own indifference to the suffering of their neighbours, these people also assume that God is indifferent. This amounted to a bold accusation, saying that God himself didn’t care about the life of his people, that God remained unaffected by their terrible actions and attitudes, and that God would not intervene for better or for worse.

Zephaniah immediately puts that lie to rest with the opening words of his prophecy, when he announces God’s judgment not only on Judah, but on the whole world. Listen to how he begins: “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord, I will sweep away both man and beast, I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the idols with the wicked.”

Someone who doesn’t care does not express anger like this! As Zephaniah sees it, God is anything but indifferent to idolatry, violence and oppression. For all of these actions bring harm, and God will not stand idly by while the strong devour the weak, and while the apathetic do nothing about it. God absolutely cares, proclaims Zephaniah, and God will demonstrate how much God cares with devastating judgment. For God’s judgment is ultimately intended to protect the vulnerable—God cares so much that God will not allow them to be trampled on. And Zephaniah is just getting started. He goes on to pronounce judgment on the surrounding nations of Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Cush, and Assyria. Verse after verse of Zephaniah is relentless judgment, which builds to a crescendo in these words spoken about Jerusalem at the beginning of chapter 3: “Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God.” But the

climax of God's verdict is found a few verses later, when the whole world again falls under God's judgment: "I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger."

Singing in the Dark: Amazingly, it is just a few short verses after this that we find Zephaniah's great hymn of joy. How can this be? When seen in its context, this is a song sung in utter and complete darkness. When the night is deepest, and all light is extinguished, when all humanity is blanketed in cold shadow, a voice begins to sing. The voice calls Jerusalem to rejoice, even as the voice declares divine forgiveness: "Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, daughter 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."

This is a great reversal, when expected judgment becomes overwhelming mercy that leads to new life. What makes the decisive difference is the arrival of God's presence. It is God's gracious and forgiving presence which brings celebration and cause for joy.

Some Bible scholars see in Zephaniah a warning about God's people going into exile, followed by their promised joyful return from exile. That is quite possible, but Zephaniah doesn't provide enough historical references to declare that with certainty. Regardless, one sure point which we can declare is this: seen in the light of its harsh context, Zephaniah's song surely shows us that God's people were not worthy of God singing over them, but God sang anyway. They were not worthy of God's visitation, but God came anyway. Zephaniah's song is pure grace: it is not about our goodness, it is not about what we have done, but it is about what God has done. Zephaniah teaches us that joy is never greater than when we receive completely unexpected and undeserved good news.

This time of year is not only Advent season, it is also exam writing season for high school and university students. I remember a great scare that I had on one of my exams in my university days. I had read the schedule wrong, and realized too late that I had missed my organic chemistry final. I thought it had been scheduled for 2 PM, but when I showed up to write it, I discovered, to my horror, an empty exam hall. When I realized my error, I immediately rushed off to my professor's office, with my heart pounding fearfully in my chest. I was well aware of the university's policy, that showing up on time for exams was the student's responsibility, and that missing an exam would automatically result in a failed grade. When I found my professor, I apologized with great embarrassment. I didn't know him and he didn't know me, because there were hundreds of students in the class. But nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. He sat me down in his office, behind his own personal desk, in his own personal chair, gave me the exam paper, and asked me some questions about myself to calm my nerves. Then he put on some Christmas music, brought over a box of chocolates and told me to eat as many as I wanted, and then he left me to write the exam. I've never felt so happy or relaxed writing an exam in my life. Instead of the F I deserved through my own error, my final mark for the course actually ended up being an A+!

This is the very kind of thing going on in Zephaniah's prophecy, only it deals with matters of far greater significance than an organic chemistry exam. The grace my professor showed me is only a small foretaste of the wonderful grace which God pours out upon us as God's people.

The Incarnation: What's more, God's grace is a further and deeper expression of God's care. If God's pronounced judgment against sin is an expression of God's care, how much more so is the arrival of God's presence with the announcement of forgiveness? To the people who said, the Lord does not care, the Lord will do nothing either good or bad, Zephaniah portrays the exact opposite. Our God is not indifferent, observing human life from a distance. Rather, at this time of year we remember how God entered into our world in human flesh, in the mystery and wonder of the incarnation. God cares about us so much that God came to be with us.

Zephaniah's remarkable song in the dark reminds me of Zechariah's song in Luke 1: "And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender mercy of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The fullness of Zephaniah's joyful prophecy is realized in the coming of Jesus. When the long shadows of night seemed impenetrable, Jesus pierced through them and came to be with us. His light did not shine on those who somehow deserved it, but on those who dwelt in darkness and the shadow of death. The basis of our joy today is the mercy God has shown in caring so deeply about us and our world that God came to us in Jesus, through whose birth and life and death and resurrection we have received redemption, the forgiveness of sin. In the light of such love, we also, like those whom Zephaniah addressed, no longer need to fear any harm.

Rejoice Wholeheartedly: What is the appropriate response to such good news? All of this brings us back to Zephaniah's song and its stirring call to worship: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!" Such joy and celebration are a vital part of our spiritual lives. When our joy in God mirrors God's joy in us, we find the strength to live faithfully as God's people in this world.

It's for this reason that I think it's an excellent idea for the church to set aside one Sunday every year, during the season of Advent, to encourage us to live as joyful people. Zephaniah calls us to rejoice. So too does the apostle Paul in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say rejoice!" Of all people, we as the followers of Jesus have every reason to live with a spirit of carefree celebration. God is with us. God has forgiven us. God delights in us. And we have nothing to fear.

To rejoice is a choice. We can either choose apathy, or we can choose to rejoice. Apathy results when we think that God doesn't care, like many of the people of Judah in Zephaniah's day, while rejoicing results when we remember how very much God does care. This does not mean that it's always easy to celebrate. A number of years ago three young women from Edmonton, all

mothers of young children, and all from the West African country of Liberia, were killed in a car crash, caused by a reckless driver in a stolen truck. One of those women was a member of my congregation. I remember the great outpouring of grief as Joanne and I visited from home to home. But what I remember even more were the funeral services for these women. The singing for each service was led by a Liberian choir, and I have never heard such inspired singing in my life. With passion they sang of the goodness of God, even in the face of tragedy. With clear and loud voices they sang of their hope in the resurrection, as a proclamation that even death was not something ultimately to be feared. With tears streaming down their cheeks they sang of the love of God who had redeemed their fallen sisters, and into whose caring hands they now committed them. They chose to rejoice even at such a time as this because they sincerely believed that God cared for them. In the midst of great darkness, they chose to sing, and their singing reflected the goodness of God, whose light no darkness can extinguish.

Conclusion: All of this brings us back to the good news proclaimed by Zephaniah, to his great hymn of joy sung at a desperately bleak and desolate time in the history of his people:

“The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.”

Do we have the courage to imagine God’s song?