

OLD TESTAMENT: *Zephaniah 3:14-17*

- 14 Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!
- 15 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.
- 16 On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.
- 17 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."

Psalms: *130*

Psalms 130 A song of ascents.

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;
- 2 O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.
- 3 If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?
- 4 But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.
- 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.
- 6 My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.
- 7 O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.
- 8 He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

EPISTLE: *Philippians 4:4-7*

- 4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
- 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.
- 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
- 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL: *Luke 3:7-18*

- 7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”
- 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.
- 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”
- 10 “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.
- 11 John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”
- 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”
- 13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.
- 14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”
- 15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.
- 16 John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.
- 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”
- 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

At this time, we are all in eager anticipation. Children anticipate the coming holidays and make plans and requests for their presents. Adults anticipate holiday parties—either planning and hosting them or attending them.

This season we also anticipate. We anticipate with the Old Testament believers the birth of our Savior. As New Testament believers, we know that God has fulfilled the Promise of a Savior by being born of a virgin and dying for us so we now also anticipate our Lord's return. And it is this return which forms the anticipation in our text this morning. We await as a bride awaits her bridegroom. This picture is used throughout Scripture to illustrate the relationship between God and His Church of believers. The Song of Solomon is a vivid example of this picture. Jesus used this picture in his parables he told at Passover. And Paul likewise used this picture in explaining Christ and the Church. With Zephaniah, then, let anticipate **Our Redeemer, Our Bridegroom.** *We no longer have anything to fear, for our Lord rejoices over us.*

First some words about Zephaniah. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah. It would seem strange for Zephaniah to prophesy against Judah—Josiah led a reform movement to return the nation to God. But the reform movement was necessary because of what preceded Josiah. Under previous kings, the Lord had been forgotten. So dire was the situation that the book of the Law was discovered while cleaning out the temple! Imagine not using the Bible for years in this church—and one day cleaning the basement below us and finding a pile of Bibles behind the furnace!. That is what happened in the temple before Josiah's reign. It is thought that Zephaniah may have prophesied before Josiah's reforms. The book tells us little, only that this prophet uttered this prophesy during the thirty plus year reign of a reform king of Judah. It can certainly be a lesson to us that a godly ruler does not necessarily make a godly people.

With **Our Redeemer, Our Bridegroom,** *we no longer have anything to fear.* If there is one thing that paralyzes humans it is fear—fear of the unknown, fear of rejection, fears about one's environment. Spiritually we have fears of the unknown—what will happen to me when I die? How do I pay for my sins? Spiritually we have fears of rejection, ultimately we fear that God rejects us because of our sin. And we fear our spiritual environment. I am confident in saying that each one of us here today has had to face temptation or a conflict of such great magnitude that we wondered if maybe God had possibly forsaken us.

But we have nothing to fear. Why don't we have anything to fear? Zephaniah tells us: *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."* We have no fear because the cause of fear has been taken away. Our punishment has been taken away, our enemies defeated, and God is with us!

But why should we fear punishment? We fear it because we recognize that our sins deserve punishment. On our own we can try to pay for our sins or punish ourselves for them. But we can sacrifice all the bulls and goats we want; we'll never pay the great price. We can beat ourselves till our skin is cracked and raw, but we still haven't begun to pay the debt. You see, we sin daily in numerous ways and countless methods. A great many of our sins we are even unaware of! If you don't know what the final bill is, how can you ever begin to repay, much less know when the debt is paid off?

We also have enemies, although we often see the wrong people as enemies. St. Paul tells us that our enemies aren't flesh and blood, but the forces and principalities of this dark world. In other words, our fight is not with "those people" walking past our church doors or the government or society at large. Our fight is with unseen forces—and only God can fight that fight. "Those people" out there are prisoners-of-war just as we were prisoners-of-war.

Our God also promises to be with us. In fact, one of the names of Jesus is "Immanuel"—literally "God with us." And this is a promise God kept. He did not desert Adam and Eve when they sinned, but promised them a Savior. He did not desert mankind in the Flood, but saved Noah and his family to keep the human race going. God did not desert his people Israel, but led them out of bondage in Egypt and made them his own race. Even today's text is an affirmation of that promise. Count how many prophets God sent to his people—both those who wrote books in our Bible and those sent merely to proclaim God's word—and you soon see that, while the people of God were often unfaithful to God, God was faithful with His promises and repeatedly called his people to repentance.

Not only do we not have anything to fear, but Zephaniah also tells us: **Our Redeemer, Our Bridegroom. rejoices over us.** What does a new bridegroom feel for his bride? He's usually happy, isn't he? Pastor Phil is often heard introducing his wife as "my beautiful bride, Pam." We like to think of our wives as those beautiful angels we were married to on our wedding day—every hair in place, radiant in that white dress. That's how God rejoices over us every day! Zephaniah tells us: **"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."**

Look at those words again: **He is mighty to save.** God IS our knight in shining armor. He took our place on the cross to pay for our sins. He defeated Satan so that Satan's accusations are no longer valid.

He will take great delight in you. Notice that there are no conditions? Zephaniah doesn't say, he will take delight in you if you follow his commands. Simply that God takes delight in us.

He will quiet you with his love. How often don't we cry out? We cry out because of the ravages of sin in our lives. We cry out in our guilt. We cry out in our futile attempts to

repay God. But God quiets us in His love, a love that has taken away the guilt and the ravages of sin and has paid the price for our sins.

He will rejoice over you with singing. When do we usually sing? When we're happy, right? When does this church sound the noisiest? Usually at Christmas and Easter when our joy explodes with our lips. In Lent, we aren't as in the mood for singing and it is subdued. Or when we feel down, we'll sing a peppy tune or play a peppy CD to lift us up. That is how God views us—he rejoices over us with singing!

The last verse of our text today corresponds with the first verse. In verse 14, we are told what our response will be. In verse 17, we see what God's actions are. We are encouraged to **"Sing, oh Daughter of Zion...shout aloud, O Israel"** because **"[God] will rejoice over you with singing."** **"Be glad and rejoice, O Daughter of Jerusalem"** because **"[God] will quiet you with his love."** **"The LORD has taken away your punishment"** because **"he is mighty to save."** And finally, both sections assure us that **the LORD, the King of Israel—the LORD your God—is with us.**

It may not seem out of place to your ears to hear the address, "O Israel." We hear it often and assume it means the nation whom God chose to carry out his Promise. But to Zephaniah's audience, there might be some unease. You see, the northern nation of Israel was no longer an entity when Zephaniah prophesied. They had been conquered by the Assyrians and the peoples of the ten northern tribes are lost to history. But we often get into trouble when we think of Israel as only the nation God chose to carry out his Promise.

It refers to the people he chooses—whether they be Jew or Gentile. Some day sit down and look at the sons of Jacob (known as Israel), the tribes as they were allotted land in the Promised Land, and the tribes as they are listed in Revelation. You will see three different lists. You see, "Israel" means "wrestles with God." God is with us in our struggle. What, you think he'll take the time to create us, go through all the agony of dying on the cross to save us, only to abandon us? I think not. God is right here with us, struggling and wrestling with us whenever we are faced with trials and temptations.

While Zephaniah's message was hard for his hearers to hear, God didn't leave his people with doom and gloom. He gave them the Gospel. He reiterated his Gospel Promise of Immanuel. Like a bridegroom he grooms us as his bride, making us holy in his sight. With his blood he sees us as holy and righteous and sings over us. He quiets us with his love. All the qualities that a lady seeks in a potential mate are embodied in our Savior. As His Church, we are his dear treasure. Go in the peace of knowing that God is our Redeemer, our Bridegroom. He is mighty to save, so we have nothing to fear. And our God rejoices over us as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. Be glad and rejoice! Don't let your arms hang limp, but clap your joy as the chosen ones of God!

Amen.