

The Lord Your God is in Your Midst

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Because of the short length of his book of Scripture, only three chapters in all, Zephaniah is listed among the twelve minor prophets. But even though his book is small, his message is huge. Let me explain.

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah, who was the last good and godly king of Judah. His reign was a glimmer of light in an otherwise dark age. In the sixty years leading up to Josiah's coronation, the nation had been ruled by his father and grandfather, both of whom were exceedingly wicked men who led their subjects into idolatry and all of the worst practices of the pagan nations to include child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, witchcraft, sorcery, and necromancy, that is, communication with the spirits of the dead – or to be more precise, communication with demons pretending to be the spirits of the dead. Encouraged and promoted by their leaders, these vile things were being practiced by the people of Judah all throughout the country, and even (I'm sorry to say) within the Lord's temple itself.

Josiah was only eight years old when he took the throne. His father, Amon, was assassinated by his closest officials, leaving the boy suddenly in charge of the nation. In the tenth year of his reign, when he was just 18, Josiah got it into his head to do some upgrade work on the Lord's temple which had fallen into disrepair. He directed the priests to do an inventory of the temple treasury in order to see what funds were available to spend on this renovation project. It was while performing this task that the priests stumbled upon the greatest treasure of all: they found the Holy Scriptures that had been hidden, unread, and ignored for the preceding seven decades.

When the newly discovered Scriptures were read before the king, he tore his robes in shock and horror. He was hearing God's Word for the first time. And what he heard, terrified him. He had no idea that what was going on – all the idolatry and the evil practices that went with it – was wrong. It was the culture he was raised in. No one had ever taught him different. But now he could see how angry the Lord must be with him and all of his people. He was certain that the Lord's righteous wrath must soon fall on them all. In an attempt to ward this off, he began directing what can only be described as an Old Testament Reformation. We're returning to God's Word, he told his priests and advisors. We're going to make things right. So, they cleansed the temple of the idols and the altars to the false gods. They tore down their unholy shrines throughout the land. They cut down the groves where the sensuous worship of the goddess Asherah took place. They desecrated the altar in the Hinnom Valley just outside of Jerusalem where infants were being burned alive to placate the bloodthirsty gods Molech and Baal.

But it wasn't enough just to remove what was wrong. More importantly, the King ordered that they return to doing what was right. He ensured that God's word was read publicly to the people. He had them taught the Lord's commands and the gracious history of his interaction with his people. He reinstated the prescribed daily sacrifices, the prayers, and the sacred festivals like Passover and the Day of Atonement. He oversaw a complete renovation of the religious life of the nation.

Unfortunately, all these efforts were too little, too late. When the King and his advisors inquired of the Lord's true prophets regarding their situation, they heard the response that yes,

the Lord was indeed angry with his people for their sins and their rebellion against him, and that yes, his severe judgment was going to fall on them – but not, as it turns out, during the reign of Josiah. The reforms he instituted bought them a little time, a stay of execution, if you will. The trouble with a religious reformation directed from the top down, however, is that it doesn't necessarily change the hearts of the people. For the most part they were thoroughly addicted to all the sins, vice, and idolatry that Josiah tried to stamp out and they weren't particularly interested in hearing God's Word or worshipping him. At the king's insistence they just sort of went through the motions because they had to. Almost instantaneously, upon the king's death, the majority of the people went right back to their old ways – and worse (if that's possible).

None of this was a surprise to the Lord. He knew the hearts of the people and where their loyalties lay. And so, through the prophet Zephaniah, he warned them of the coming judgment that was going to fall upon them – the judgment that had been held back temporarily thanks to Josiah. I mentioned earlier that the prophet's book consists of just three chapters. The first two and a half of them are some of the darkest and most frightful words written in the Scripture. I'll give you a little sample: "The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness ... I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they sinned against the Lord; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung."

Not very cheery stuff, is it? And it just keeps going on like that piling up increasingly dire predictions on top of each other. But then, in the section that we heard this morning, there is this sudden and unexpected shift. All at once it's "Sing aloud! Rejoice and be glad with all your heart!" It doesn't seem to fit. You're left wondering, "Where did this come from? In view of all this forecast gloom and doom, what is there to sing and be joyful about?"

But then it occurs to you that the prophet is now speaking to a different audience. The judgments he pronounces apply to all, the wicked and the faithful alike. But the wicked won't care. They don't fear the Lord or believe his wrath will fall. They are secure in their sin. And when they hear the Lord's threats, they scoff and say, "Bah! You're wasting our time. It ain't gonna happen. Leave me alone."

Not so the faithful few; and there are always some that the Lord preserves even in the darkest times. They take the Lord's threats seriously. They know his judgement is coming. And it leads them to repentance and faith. And thus it is to them the Lord now speaks words of hope and encouragement. They *are* to sing and rejoice. And the reason they are to do so is explicitly stated twice in the passage we heard: "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 with his love."

The Lord is telling his faithful that he's with them in all this, and even though there is death and destruction all around, when things look hopelessly dark and distressing, "I've got you. I'm here taking care of you. I won't let you fall. Not even a hair of your head will perish. And when the wave of my judgment passes, in the end I will restore you."

It's exactly what the faithful of Zephaniah's day needed to hear because things were going to get worse than they could have imagined. Many of them would end up being taken into exile in Babylon. Ripped from their homes and loved ones, marched off in chains, they were forced to settle in what were essentially labor colonies. That was bad enough. But it happened while they were there, longing with all their hearts to return to their homes in Judah and to the

Lord's temple in Jerusalem, that the nation was utterly destroyed: all its cities laid waste, and its people either killed or sold into slavery. And the temple, the Lord's one dwelling place on earth, was leveled to the ground. It would seem to the people in exile that the Lord had abandoned them. "No", he says, "I'm still with you. I'm in your midst. Sing and rejoice. I'm here. I've got you. And I will restore you."

Through the prophet Zephaniah, the Lord says the same thing to his faithful of these increasingly dark times in which we live. The day of his judgment is fast approaching, a day of terror and destruction for the wicked and unfaithful. For them it won't be pretty. But for the faithful remnant, the Lord is in our midst. And not in just some nebulous fuzzy-feeling sort of way: he tells us where to find him. He is with us in his Word. Through it he speaks to comfort and encourage us. Through the Word he brings us to repentance and strengthens our faith in Jesus the Savior who shed his blood for our forgiveness. And he is with us tangibly in his Sacraments. In the water of Baptism he washes away our sin and grants us rebirth. In the Holy Supper we receive our Lord's body and blood to feed our faith in him. The Lord our God is in our midst.

Thus it is we have cause to sing and rejoice in his presence even as the world around us grows darker and colder, as the sins of the wicked grow ever more vile, as our leaders become involved in increasingly flagrant scandals, as economies collapse, as pandemics spread death, as wars threaten, and as fires, floods, famines, earthquakes, and storms strike the earth. None of these things should come as a surprise. The Lord has already told us that it's only going to get worse.

But he has also told us that he's with us in all of it, and that he will not let us perish or be lost. The Lord our God is in our midst. His arm is mighty to save, and save us he will. Therefore come what may, let us sing, be glad, and rejoice in his salvation which is always ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!