

## The Promise of Better Days

### The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Near the back of your Old Testament or Hebrew Bible you'll find a tiny book called Zephaniah. It may not be your favorite book in the Bible (perhaps you've never even heard of this book), but the last half of chapter 3 (verses 14-20) contains a wonderful, moving, tender, strong – fiercely strong - description of God's love. I said last week that according to the philosopher Simone Weil, a brilliant French woman who died in 1943, claimed that only two things that can crack open the human heart: suffering and beauty. The picture of God's love at the end of this little book is designed to crack our hearts open with its beauty. This is not what we deserve. This is not what we all have coming, but this is the love God offers us.

Before we begin, let's pray: *“O God, our Father, show us the beauty of your love. Show us the beauty of the Gospel. And crack our hearts wide open as we respond to your love by knowing you and serving you. Let us find our deepest delight and joy in you, the fountain of Unending Joy. Amen.”*

Who is Zephaniah and what's his story? Well, we discover in verse 1 that “the word of the Lord came to him.” God spoke to him and through him. I realize that for some of you that may sound far-fetched, but just hold on and hear his message. See if this “word from the Lord” rings true in our world today. I think it does – otherwise I wouldn't be up here talking about. But just keep an open mind and decide for yourself.

Secondly, we know that Zephaniah lived in the capital city of Jerusalem. He probably lived near his “Wall Street district” (see 1:11), rubbing shoulders with the wealthy and powerful. We also know that he spoke and wrote during a critical time in his country. Verse 1 locates him during the reign of King Josiah. That little detail gives us a good picture of the spiritual and moral conditions of Zephaniah's life. For 57 years prior to Josiah, Judah had been ruled by two lousy kings – a guy named Manasseh and a king named Amon. They wrecked havoc on the country. When King Josiah came to office, he started to clean house and reform the country.

But by the time Zephaniah was writing the little book that we have in our Bibles, these reforms had only just begun *or* they hadn't gone far enough. So Zephaniah, speaking “the word of the Lord,” wasn't happy. This book begins on very sober note (see 1:3): “I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will only have heaps of rubble when I cut man off from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.” Verse 3 uses non-literal, poetic language to communicate a specific truth: namely, God will clean house. Some of the people – like us – may have been tempted to say, “Yes, it's about time God judged and swept away all those terrible, wicked people out there.” “Actually,” God says in verse 4, I'm coming after you first: “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem.” That's the pattern in the Bible: we always want God to judge people *out*

*there*, but God always starts *in here*, in our hearts, in our house – with people like us who claim to know him.

So why was God so upset? For starters, the people still couldn't decide if they wanted to love God or the destructive, empty, angry gods called Baal and Molech – the ones who required child sacrifice and staffed their churches with full-time male and female prostitutes, connecting worship with sexual orgy (see 1:4-6). And whenever people turn away from God, it always affected the way they treated people. The rich acted like devouring wolves towards the poor and powerless (see 3:3-4). The powerful and privileged, the people Zephaniah rubbed shoulders with, didn't seem to care. They wallowed in apathy (see 1:12) and strutted with arrogance (see 2:15 – “This is the carefree city that lived in safety. She said to herself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me.’”). And they refused to listen to anyone (see 3:2).

**The Day of the Lord.** So because Zephaniah – and God – couldn't just stick their heads in the sand, this little book predicts some major changes. Zephaniah uses a more technical phrase: he calls it “The Day of the Lord.” That phrase (which Zephaniah uses at least 25 times) means that God won't stand by and tolerate all the crap in the world. God will set things right. We could call it a *shake-up*. So, for instance, when the Minnesota Vikings football team couldn't win a game *and* the players kept throwing wild parties and getting arrested, the owner of the team started a shake-up, firing the coach and trading the quarterback. Or if you're familiar with AA and other addiction treatments, you might call it an *intervention*. When your friend or family member sinks into an addiction and can't see his way out of it, someone needs to plan an intervention. Someone needs to get in his face and say, “Look, you're killing yourself and you're hurting every one around you. We won't let you do this anymore.” ***The Day of the Lord refers to a God-sized, global, earth-shattering, life-altering shake-up and intervention.*** It starts with us (personal), but it moves out to governments and nations (social). According to this little book, “The Day of the Lord” will be intense (see 3:6 and 8): “I have cut off the nations; their strongholds are demolished ... I have decided to assemble the nations ... and to pour out my wrath on them – all my fierce anger, the whole world will be consumed with the fire of my jealous love.”

**God's Love is Fierce.** At this point you may be thinking: “I thought God was nice. I thought God's love would crack my heart open with its beauty.” But we have to understand something about God's love: it's beautiful but it isn't mushy; it's comforting but it's not cushy. At times God's love can be strong and even fierce. Look with me at verse 17 – “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save you.” It's a little tricky to translate the Hebrew. It could be a verbal form as in “God is a warrior to keep you safe” or it may be a noun as in “God the victorious warrior.” Either way it's telling us that God's love is fierce and fiercely for us.

God is a Warrior. Does that surprise you? It still stuns me but this theme runs throughout the entire Bible. For example, when the Israelites came out of their 400-year long enslavement in Egypt and they crossed the Red Sea into freedom, they envisioned God as a great warrior on their behalf: “The Lord is a Warrior,” they cried, “the Lord is

his name” (Exodus 15:3). And then in the very last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, when Jesus returns it says, “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (Revelation 19:15). Jesus has the same character of God in the Old Testament: He is a Warrior for his people.

This is a rich image for God, but on one level it means that God will fight *for* us; He will fight for our freedom and our deep joy. How does God fight for us? Sometimes God has to fight for us by fighting *against* the things in our life that are destroying us. God will woo and win our hearts, and sometimes he has to fight through our sin to get us back. Recall my analogy about the intervention for your addicted friend. Your friend can’t stop using alcohol or sex or spending or on-line investing to soothe the ache in his heart. Everyone else just ignores it and hopes it gets better, but it never does. So one day you plan an intervention. You take away all the bottles or all the credit cards. You destroy them. And then you sit him down and offer him a better way. You give him a chance to wake up. How does your friend respond? He’s probably confused and angry. He feels like you’re against him; you’re taking his life and the source of his joy away. You’re stripping him of real joy. But, of course, you and I know that you’re fighting for your friend. You are a warrior on his behalf.

You see, if we don’t understand the fierce, warrior-like love of God for us, we may often feel confused about God. We’re all addicted to sin in one form or another – and it never gives true joy. So we all need an intervention. God will seem like he’s against us, taking away our life. What’s he doing? In Zephaniah 3:6 God says that he will demolish our strongholds. He will take away the lesser things that can never give joy absent or unfaithful. God will seem to be taking our joy away. When in reality, God is really laboring and fighting to give us real joy.

Perhaps some of you are experiencing God’s fierce love.

**God’s Love is Delight-ful.** But of course God’s love isn’t just tough and fierce and warrior-like. It’s also filled with delight for us. Notice the rest of verse 17 – “he will take great delight in you.” Let me ask a question: Have you ever thought that God delights in you? Let me ask it this way: Do you think God likes you? I did not say: Do you think God loves you? That’s too easy. Most of you will give the “spiritually correct” answer. But I said, “Do you think God *likes* you?” Or we could ask: What does God feel when God thinks of you? Disgust – as in, “O, my gosh, what a mess?” Anger? Disappointment? Some of you had fathers or mothers – or both – that treated you with contempt and “un-delight” and you can’t imagine God any other way. Some of you were abandoned or abused or neglected and you don’t sense God feeling anything towards you.

“He will take great delight in you.” As a prophet Zephaniah was speaking prophetically. Which sounds obvious, but it’s important to keep in mind as we look at this verse. Prophetic speech means that he was looking backwards to all the wonderful words of promise in the Old Testament and God’s strong covenant love; but it also means that he was looking forward, anticipating the New Testament and the even more wonderful promises that Jesus would bring. One of the wonderful promises of Jesus concerns his

death on the cross for us. Jesus lived the life that we should have lived; and thus, when we believe in him, we receive his righteousness. And he died the death we should have died because of our sin and rebellion against God; and thus, when we trust in Him we are set free from the penalty and the curse of our sin. So now, when we trust fully in Jesus and turn to him and cry out to him, God the Father sees us in Christ. He delights in us as much as He delights in Jesus – and Jesus is utterly perfect and clean and pleasing and obedient. That means there is nothing that can take God’s delight away from use.

I’ve mentioned my former mentor “Doc” or Dr. C. Philip Hinerman from Park Avenue United Methodist Church in south Minneapolis. Whenever Doc used to see my coming off in the distance and Doc would beam – I mean, I could see it on his face a football field away – wave his hand in the air and say with an air of grandeur, “Hello, Mathew Woodley, O Great One!” And I’d look behind me and wonder, “Is there another Mathew Woodley right behind me.” But, no, he meant me. He was looking at me! He was beaming at me! He was honoring me! He was delighting in me.

Here’s my conclusion based on Zephaniah 3: because of Jesus, God treats us like Doc. He beams when he sees us. “He will take great delight in you.” Say it to yourself. Say it to your own heart. “He will take great delight in you.” Believe it today. When you take the bread and cup this morning, know in your heart, feel in your heart, that God is beaming at you, God is delighting in you. God is honoring you. Is that taking it too far? Why would God honor me? Listen to verse 20 – “I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes.” God delights in you and he honors you. Wait a minute, I thought I was supposed to honor God. Yes, of course, God is worthy of all your honor. But listen to this: God honors you.

**God will quiet you with his love.** One of the biggest problems we face in our fractured world is the reality of our restlessness. We’re anxious and uptight almost all the time. We can’t relax; we live with constant sense of being anxious and hurried. Last week I rushed frantically into my kitchen with 11 plastic Stop and Shop bags on my arms. Why did I have 17 bags on my arms? I was restless and hurried and I had to get all the groceries in one trip. So I flung the bags on the counter – and they all made it except one: the bag with a gallon of milk and a half gallon of cranberry juice. They plunged to the floor, smashed open and red and white liquid started running all over the floor – a gallon and a half. Amazingly, I did not swear, but I did start screaming some other “non-churchy” type words. I am a hurried, anxious, restless human being living in a hurried, anxious and restless culture.

Nearly 2,500 years ago the people of Zephaniah’s day were also restless. They had put all their hopes in the nation of Assyria because that was the coolest show in town. But now Assyria was fading and Babylon was coming to attack Israel and haul them into exile. As Zephaniah prophesied this impending exile was only twenty years away. Do you know what happens in exile? Everything gets thrown into chaos. Nothing stays the same. Everything changes. You just got settled down and then the upheaval starts again.

Our life today is still like living in exile. We can't help it or control it. People change. Our health changes. Our jobs change. Our marriages change. Our children grow up and move away. Our nation changes. Our church changes. We look around and suddenly realize we don't know half the people here. People move in and out of our lives. Nothing seems to be stable. So our hearts are restless and anxious.

But God says, "there is one thing that will never change: my love. It's stable; it's a rock. It is the only permanently safe place in the universe. So turn to me because I want to quiet you with my love. I want you to stay with me and stop the churning in your heart." As you come to the Lord's Table this morning, as you take the bread and the cup, remember the love of God for you. Let God quiet your anxious heart. Rest in his love.

**He will rejoice over you with singing.** There's one final astounding truth about God's beautiful love (see the end of verse 17): "he will rejoice over you with singing." This is so unbelievably tender and beautiful. God singing over me? Yes, that's what it says. When I think of this verse I remember singing over my daughter who is now 21 years old. I sang over her while she was in the womb and I sang over her on the day she was born. My wife labored for 24 hours but Bonnie was wedged with her face upside down. When they finally performed a C-section, Bonnie's face was bruised and battered. Julie was exhausted so I held Bonnie in my arms and rocked her to sleep, singing every lullaby I could think of. Then as she grew up, Bonnie and I used to sing this father-daughter duet about a little girl that loves her daddy. The song follows the little girl through her young life until she gets married and her and her daddy sing the song on her wedding day. We sang it at every year at every church I've ever been at - until she actually had a great voice and mine was, well, not-great. Anyway, on her wedding night her husband Trevor - yes, Trevor! (as in Seinfeld's "Newman!") - found that old song and played it during the father-daughter dance on her wedding night. I heard the song and started bawling.

Did you ever think that God sings over you like I sang over my daughter? Did you ever think that God has an entire history of singing over you? God sang over you when you were still in the womb. God still sings over babies in the womb. God sang over you on the day you were born. God sang over you when you went to school. God sang over you when you felt hurt and alone. God sang over you when you tried to walk away from him. God sang over you when you told him to get lost. God sang over you when you first turned your heart towards faith in Jesus. God still sings over you - when you ache, when you doubt, when you're tired and feel like giving up, when you fall into sin, when you're serving God and living for him. God has a love song just for you. God has a history of singing over you.

**The Fruit of God's Love: Joy!** I hope the beauty of God's love is starting to crack your heart open. And as it does, the end result of knowing and feeling God's love is joy. See verse 14: "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel. Be glad and rejoice with all your heart..." You want to sing and shout and dance and raise your hands - or do and feel something. This isn't just an intellectual truth. This is life! This is so beautiful it should crack your heart wide open.

Mother Teresa used to say, “Let nothing so sadden your heart that it takes away the joy of the Risen Christ.” That’s a good application of this passage from Zephaniah. If you’re not a believer this morning, do you know that the Christian path is all about joy? God wants to give you joy. Did you know that Jesus died for you because God likes you? If you are a follower of Jesus, is there something that is sucking joy out of your life this morning? Maybe God is doing an intervention in your heart. Maybe you’ve hit a wall and you can’t seem to get around it. Yes, it hurts, but God is doing something good in your life. Maybe other Christians have robbed you of joy.

Do you say, “I can’t rejoice in God’s love because I’m such a mess and such a sinner.” But look at verse 15 – “The Lord has taken away your punishment.” Jesus bore it on the cross and it is gone. But you say, “I cannot rejoice in God’s love because I have too many forces working against me right now.” But look at verse 19 – “I will deal with all who oppress.” But you say, “I cannot rejoice in God’s love because I’ve been too wounded by life or my parents or a broken marriage or my own failure or my health.” But look at verse 19 – God says, “I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered.” But you say, “I cannot rejoice in God’s love because there is a cloud of shame over my head. I am defective. I have failed. I have this sin, this addiction, this family problem, these doubts, this grief and it won’t go away. The shame clings to me.” But God says in verse 19 God says, “I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame.” But you say, “I’m just too far from God. I’ve wandered too far. I’m not a good church person like everyone else here. I have secrets that would scandalize the righteous.” To which I would say, “Join the club, my friend. We all have secrets which would scandalize the righteous. The good news is that no one here is righteous so stop worrying about it.” And I’d also point you to verse 20 where God says, “At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home.” Let nothing keep you from having joy in the Risen Christ this morning.

As we said over the past two Sundays, this season is a time for questions, so here are three more questions:

- ❖ Have you experienced the truth of verse 15 – “The Lord has taken away your punishment?” When Jesus died on the cross, he took our punishment and set us free. Are you trusting in that this morning?
- ❖ Is there anything that is robbing you of joy this morning? “Let nothing so sadden your heart that it takes away the joy of the Risen Christ.”
- ❖ How would your life change if you could believe, receive and rest in all the wonderful promises in verse 17?