

Introduction

Check in and Introductions

Joy at Home

Sermon Reflection Notes

The ministry of the prophet Zephaniah spanned the years of King Josiah's reign in Judah, from 640 B.C.E. to 609 B.C.E. Zephaniah was the first prophetic voice to be heard in Judah since the time of Isaiah and Micah – that is, since 701 B.C.E. The message of Zephaniah is clear and universal in its scope: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord" (*Zephaniah 1:2*).

Such joy and happiness in Advent, right? This is not an uncommon message in the Old Testament; we hear it in *Isaiah 13:9*—"See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it" and again in *Ezekiel 7:25*—"When terror comes, they will seek peace, but there will be none." And the message is just as bleak in Zephaniah.

Advent is designed to be a season of reflection and penitence leading up to the Christmas, but Christians tend to see the third Sunday of Advent as a shift. It's the Sunday of anticipation and joy; we light the pink candle; we feel just how close Christmas really is.

So, Zephaniah feels jarring to us if we focus on the beginning chapters. Zephaniah crams judgment on Jerusalem and oracles against foreign nations into two chapters. There is little joy, less hope. But at the end of the judgment and destruction, after realizing God didn't need a flood to start over--that there are other ways of creating a clean slate--we get chapter three. We see and feel the shift; God offers a future beyond the chaos.

The people of Jerusalem who survived the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 B.C.E. are not to assume that they are exempt from God's judgments. Their sins against God are specific: they are idolatrous, indifferent toward God, and embrace the dominant culture of greed and wealth. But the God of judgment did not stop at judgment.

Pastor Ron mentioned the President's decision this week to commute the sentence of 1500 people, most of whom were placed on home arrest during the pandemic. They faced and endured judgment, and now we can imagine the rejoicing in their homes this Christmas as they are set free. Whether or not the President should have commuted all those sentences is a decision above our pay grade, but it can be an important reminder for us to remember that our faith, if nothing else, is about trusting in a God who does not give us what we deserve. We have all been set free haven't we? We have all had our sentences commuted by God.

The scripture this week ends with the words: "At that time, I will bring you home." We yearn for home, for the places we may be from or the places and people that make us feel safest and most loved. And above all, "we wait, we yearn for God to bring us home." We are here, knowing full well that God's grace was extended to us when we didn't deserve it. God commuted our sentence, not just as individuals, but as a people. "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst" and that is what Advent is all about, preparing for God to be in our midst.

The message of Zephaniah is that there is hope following judgment. The judgment is real, but we don't get a fair trial. The courtroom is rigged. Justice is not blind. God is the judge,

and the defense attorney, not to mention the victim who will bear the penalty. The whole thing is rigged in our favor. God will be with us through it all.

We light the candle of joy because our sentence is commuted. Because God offers us grace and offers us Jesus. And so, together with God, with Jesus, we shall all rejoice at home together.

Scripture

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSVUE)

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸as on a day of festival." I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. As the prophets of the Old Testament suggested, judgment is real. When we break covenant with God, the earth, with each other, there are consequences; judgment occurs. Talk about consequences vs. judgment (*the connotations of the words perhaps*).
2. The prophets called the whole people of God toward reform and renewal. Why do we think the text addresses "the whole people of God?" How does this differ from the way we often speak of "individual sins?"
3. We are in the midst of the four weeks of Advent, lighting one candle each week. The sermon titles have corresponded with the candles: Hope at Home, Love at Home, Joy at Home...next week is Peace at Home.
 - How does the tradition of Advent, the tradition of hope, love, joy, and peace, allow us to also ready ourselves for transformation?
4. By chapter three of Zephaniah, there has been a shift from "I will sweep everything away" to "I will bring you home." The sentence against a sinful, broken people has been commuted. We are used to hearing and using phrases like "forgiveness of sins" or "pardoning of sins" in church. This week, we heard the phrase "commuting of sentences." Think about that. Discuss.
 - *What's the difference between/among forgiving, pardoning, commuting?*

- *Does the word choice matter? Does the situation change depending on the word? Or does the word change the situation?*
 - *Are we more comfortable with one vs. another? Why?*
5. Pastor Ron said at the end of the sermon: “God is the judge, and the judge is also our defense attorney, not to mention God is the victim who will bear the penalty. The whole thing is rigged in our favor. God will be with us through it all.” What do we call this “rigged system” God offers us? Who qualifies for this? How are we called to live because of this?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we stand before the voices of ancient prophets who speak to people who have not kept covenant with you—people who have wreaked havoc with your creation. In our hearing the prophets we recognize ourselves as people who also do not keep covenant with you.

And so, we are amazed that time after time, you continue to make your home among us. We are amazed that you walk beside us, even in the consequences of our sin. We are amazed that you are our judge, our defense, and the One who redeems us and makes us new.

We pray, this day, for the surging of your Spirit among us. We pray for the coming of newness upon your whole people, that our lives may be ordered once more in the joy and hope of your coming. Come, Lord Jesus, make your home with us, and help us to make our home with you. Amen.

“Grace follows judgment. God always calls us to come home.”