**December 16, 2018**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18**

Advent is a season for prophets. Because this is a season of waiting and watching, and because prophets are seasoned watchers, they are the go-to voice for Advent. Prophets wait through hunger and desolation for God’s promise to be fulfilled. Prophets hear God’s voice when everyone else hears silence. Prophets see God at work when others see only despair. Prophets watch -- with hope unfailing -- for God to break into the world. So the lectionary calendar of scripture readings directs worshippers to the prophets through these 4 weeks of Advent. We listen to Malachi and Jeremiah and Micah and Zephaniah (today).

Zephaniah was a minor prophet – one of the short little books between Daniel and the New Testament. It was his job was to tell the story of Israel’s unfaithfulness and move them to contrition. Zephaniah’s three chapters are not exactly happy verses. A preaching colleague said that “Zephaniah could give the Grim Reaper a run for his money.” [[1]](#footnote-1) The book begins with God’s promise to “sweep everything away from the earth” because God’s chosen people were unfaithful. It’s not just that people were worshipping other gods; some people just didn’t care about YHWH anymore. They said “the Lord will neither do good nor harm.” God was a nothing and a nobody, so they said. But the Lord their God heard them and promised punishment. A day of wrath and distress would come with ruin and devastation, clouds and battles. Things didn’t sound good.

Yet God’s Day of Reckoning wouldn’t be done to send the people to hell and annihilate creation; this Day would happen so that the people could be *purified* and set right with God. (grace through justification!) The warrior person of God will go to battle to win the people back, not to rape and pillage. The prophecy about this Day is ultimately Good news. And today’s verses are the culmination of this hope and joy. “The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness. The Lord will renew you with love. The Lord will exult over you with loud singing.” Even though the people misbehaved, even though the people made God mad, God would fix them so all would be well. God would renew them with love so that God could rejoice over them and sing over them. The bad days would be water under the bridge. This is a fresh start to the relationship. A return to original intentions and hopes.

How wonderful it would be to see God – the One whom *we* worship and to whom *we* sing praises – that God would be the one singing with joy over us. That God, our maker and redeemer – the warrior who gives victory – would *exult* over us. It would be the reconciliation to win all reconciliations.

The prophet Zephaniah knew that God’s future would be different from the present. This would turn our mourning into dancing. Our despairing watch will become a hopeful wait. Because God’s love and the prophets’ joy shapes our waiting, Advent is not *just* a somber occasion. This is a season for light and life, not just darkness and longing. Our Advent wreaths include both purple candles (signifying Christ’s blood, his royal throne, and our penitence) AND a single *pink* candle which interrupts our dirges with joy’s bright light. Today (the third Sunday of Advent) is traditionally the party week, when we light the third candle and celebrate the good news of God’s promise.

Zephaniah’s words go on to describe a beautiful homecoming party. There will be singing and dancing and healing and belonging. “God will rejoice over you with gladness. God will renew you with love. God will remove disaster from you and deal with your oppressors. God will save the lame and gather the outcast. God will change shame into praise and renown as God brings us home.” The troubles of this life will be over. All will be well. For we will finally be home – back where we belong. Back where we started, in God’s house, at God’s table, feasting with our brothers and sisters.

Some of us will have a hard time getting excited about that eschatological homecoming – that Day when Christ will come and take us all in his arms. Some of us feel quite at home *here* with our families, inside the walls we’ve known our whole lives long. Fred Chacalos built the house in which he has lived for 60 years! He built some of the neighboring houses. He built the church office where I sit each day. This is certainly home to Fred. But the words weren’t written directly to Fred, or to other lucky folks who live in a place that they can call “home.” These words were written to Jewish people in exile. These words were for slaves and refugees who hadn’t been home in generations. These words were written for some Jewish people who had never *seen* their family home. So it’s difficult for us to have any sense of the hope and longing and disbelieving joy that they might have felt about “going home.” When you have no possessions, when your family was killed or enslaved, when your home was burned, what does *home* even mean? Where could they go? And what miracle could make it so?

As a little girl I always felt “different” from everyone else at school. I was more comfortable with my father’s college students, or with my parents’ adult friends, but I didn’t belong in either of those groups. In my 20s I floated from mission work to grad school, I dated, I worked in churches, I lived in 4 different states and 1 other country, but never felt “at home” in any of those places. Nothing fit in the harmonic way that I expected friends and work and dwelling weaving together into a *home*. I came to the conclusion that I must have been born to wander the world, blowing from one place to another, never rooting down any one place. Almost like Mary Poppins, who moved along when the wind blew from a new direction. I remember saying to friends that I didn’t believe that I would find a *home* on earth. I believed that I would feel this sense of longing and unsettledness until I went to be with God – in my eternal home. This sense has lessened somewhat in recent years, but still stirs my spirit occasionally. Perhaps it is familiar to you, too…?

Reinhold Nieber wrote that “the human spirit is incapable of ridding itself of an abiding sense of homelessness.” As if we are never quite at home anywhere, always searching for the sweet spot. Always wondering if *this* is where we belong, if *this* is the person I was supposed to marry, if *this* is the *best* job for me? People yearn for belonging on all levels of our lives. These particular weeks of the year – between Thanksgiving and New Years – when people pack into cars and airplanes to visit *home*, when people invite friends and family to crowd around their tables at *home*, when people evaluate the best and worst of the year, totaling receipts and considering changes for the new year – *this* time of year the idea of “home” can be heavy-laden. What it is, where it is, and who’s there…

Regardless of the state of our “home” on earth, God is always our homemaker. And worship is always our homecoming. There is always a place for you at the Table. There is always room for you in our family. We aren’t perfect. In fact, Christianity is the only human organization that requires people admit their **im**perfection. But we do our best. We try to love God and love our neighbor – faithfully – because we know that God has plans for us. Here and eternally, God has plans for us. God made us and loves us still, so we can trust Zephaniah’s prophecy that “God will rejoice over us with gladness. God will renew us with love. God will remove disaster from us and deal with our oppressors. God will save the lame and gather the outcast. God will change shame into praise and renown as God brings us home.”

Alexander Maclaren, a renowned 19th century Scottish preacher, told a story about his first job, far away from his home on the other side of the dark and forbidding moor. His father walked Alex to Glasgow on his first day and instructed the young lad to return home the same way at the end of the week. All week he worried about the journey back across the ghostly moor. When the time came to go home, he was near panic, but started out whistling to keep up his courage, all the while fearful and foreboding tears flowed down his face. Describing this years later, Maclaren wrote, “I was so frightened that I did not know whether I could go on. Then, as I looked up ahead of me, I thought I saw something or someone coming toward me. I became even more terrified. Until suddenly I saw before me coming out of the bog mist and fog the head and shoulders of the grandest man on earth. He must have known I was frightened, but all he said to me was, ‘Alex, I wanted to be with you so badly that I came to meet you.’ Then, shoulder to shoulder, my father and I walked down into that bog, and I wasn’t afraid of anything anymore.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

As you wander in the darkness this Advent, may you find yourself walking straight into God’s grand arms. May you see glimpses of the party God has planned for you. May you hear notes of the love songs God sings to you. And may you trust in the home God has prepared for you. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

1. Adams, Joanna. *Christian Century*. “Toward Home” December 12, 2006. page 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2006/121706\_vespers.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)