

## “Unexpected Good News”

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!”

You pull out your winter coat for the first time, and to your great surprise you find a \$20 bill in the pocket. A Christmas card arrives in the mail from a long-long friend you have not heard from in years. You get a phone call informing you that you have landed the job that you thought was out of your reach.

Such moments of “unexpected good news” come as a delightful surprise. They catch us off-guard, often at moments when we may be feeling sad or depressed, and transform our day into one of joy and gladness. They give us hope that good news is possible even in our darkest hours, that there is the possibility of hope even at times when all appears hopeless.

This morning, we hear a message of unexpected good news from the prophet Zephaniah, one of the Twelve Prophets (sometimes referred to as the “minor prophets” due to the length of the books that bear their name) in the Old Testament. The book of Zephaniah is a collection of the oracles or divinely inspired sermons of Zephaniah ben Cushi, a late 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE prophet. “Cushi” means “African,” and combined with the prefix “ben” (“son of”) it suggests that he was a person of African heritage. “Zephaniah” means “Yahweh protects,” pointing toward the message that the prophet will bring to the people of his time. Zephaniah may have been a Jerusalemite with connections to its Temple and royal family. The dominant motif of his preaching, the “Day of the LORD” (*yom Yahweh*), both as judgment and salvation, derives from cultic rites in the Jerusalem Temple.

- “Zephaniah’s oracles on the coming day of the Lord exhort one to do what is right and reject what is wrong or face dire consequences, while also concluding with confident assurances for the faithful and with hymns celebrating God as king.” – Robert A. Bennett.

Zephaniah begins with strong words of judgment against the officials who have not been faithful to the trust that the Lord has placed in them. He proclaims a word of judgment against the priests who have been worshiping or allowing the worship of

other gods (“... *I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the hosts of the heavens*” – 1:4-5), against the officials and the king’s sons pandering to foreign gods (“*And on the day of the LORD’s sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all who dress in foreign attire.*” – 1:8), and against the wealthy who care only for their needs and not for the poor:

- “And at that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who says in their hearts the LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm. Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they built houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.” – 1:12-13.

In response to the wrongs described in Jerusalem, Zephaniah offers a full description of the destruction in the form of the Day of the Lord; this “day” is the Lord’s dark and destructive day of judgment: “*That day will be a day of wrath, 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, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.*” (1:15-16). While many Israelites had expected the Day of the Lord to be a day of celebration and joy, prophets such as Zephaniah and Amos warn that it would be a day of darkness and not light, an inescapable day of judgment and not salvation:

- “Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear; or went into a house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” – Amos 5:18-20.

Zephaniah’s message of judgment and punishment continues into the third chapter of this brief book; but just when a reader may have given up any hope of a happy ending or a bright future there is a sudden shift in the prophet’s speech, a message of unexpected good news. The prophet who proclaimed God’s word of judgment now announces to the people “*therefore wait for me, says the LORD, for the day when I arise as a witness ... at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD.*” (3:8-9). Zephaniah reverses the expectations of his audience, proclaiming the good news that the Lord will remove the judgments against the people, vanquish Zion’s foes, and will come

again to dwell in Zion's midst. *"It is a shared joy that reverses a long and difficult history of shame and dishonor, as even the nations are summoned to sing Zion's praise."* (Margaret Odell). The shift in the tone of Zephaniah's message continues in his ninth and final oracle in which the prophet calls on the people of Jerusalem to *"sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!"* (3:14). Zephaniah announces that the condemnations of chapters 1-2 are not the last word, that even though nations have been laid waste and corruption has continued, *"my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation [so that] all of them may call on the name of the LORD."* (3:8-9). From this point through the end of his book, Zephaniah's words are a message of joy; for *"the king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more."* (3:15).

The voice that calls for Jerusalem to rejoice is like a priestly word of assurance to supplicants that their plea to God has been heard (*"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's and double for all her sins."* – Isaiah 40:2). Such a priestly oracle of blessing is assumed in the dramatic shift from lament to joyous confidence, the unexpected good news that can be heard in many of the psalms of lament:

- "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Jerusalem! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever!" – Psalm 22:22-26.

God's presence amid the community spells peace rather than disaster. Zephaniah's language of the people's joy over God as king and ruler of the nations reflects the words of the psalms proclaiming God as king (*"For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth."* – Psalm 47:2). The words of the prophet promise restoration and return for the oppressed, a promise that would be fulfilled when the LORD brought the people home from their captivity in Babylon:

- "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already scattered ... You who remind the LORD,

take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth.” – Isaiah 56:8, 62:7.

The negative Day of the Lord gives way to a day of restoration and rejoicing; the prophet affirms the power of God and God’s claim to rule in Israel and the world. It is the basis for the call of Isaiah to “*shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*” (Isaiah 12:6).

Zephaniah’s call for the people of his generation to rejoice is the call that resounds among us today on this Sunday that is celebrated as a day in which God’s people join together to “*rejoice, give thanks, and sing.*” The Third Sunday of Advent has traditionally been celebrated as Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin word “rejoice.” When Advent was a more penitential season akin to Lent (even sharing its somber liturgical colour of purple) this Sunday stood out as a day of rejoicing, symbolized by the rose-coloured candle on the Advent wreath. While our ancestors in faith solemnly prepared themselves for the coming of the Lord, they rejoiced on this Sunday in the good news proclaimed by John the Baptist that “*one who is more powerful than I is coming*” (Luke 3:16). We lift our voice with all God’s faithful people in the words of St. Paul that call us to “*rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*” (Philippians 4:4). While it may be a bit early for singing Christmas carols, it is most appropriate on this day to lift every voice to sing “*joy to the world, the Lord is come!*”

The unexpected good news that we hear on this day is the message of grace, the liberating word of God that is always surprising, always unexpected, and always a blessing. It is unexpected because it is rooted in the steadfast love of God that “*never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-24). It is the message of amazing grace that proclaims to us that “*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8), that even though “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 3:23-24). It is the unexpected good news that came to the shepherds abiding in their fields on the outskirts of Bethlehem, the message of the herald angels that “*I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” (Luke 2:10-11). It is the unexpected good news that in the little town of Bethlehem “*the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all*” (Titus 2:11).

- “For, if it is true that the child was born of the virgin and is mine, then I have no angry God and I must know and feel that there is nothing but laughter and joy in the heart of the Father and no sadness in my heart.” – Martin Luther.

Good news may feel unexpected especially at times when it seems to be in short supply, when there is nothing but “*bad news on the doorstep, I couldn’t take one more step*” (Don McLean, “American Pie”). As the seasonal darkness increases, so does the darkness in our world and in our souls and the pandemic takes yet another downward turn, as we are yet again disappointed by the news that the progress that seemed possible in October has been put on hold, and as we face another Christmas season defined by distance, restrictions, and anxiety. The good news of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem is a well-known message, but at a time when we have become accustomed to nothing but bad news it is unexpected and joyous to hear anew that “*in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*”

- “There are many things that can be a cause of rejoicing: good news, an unexpected reprieve, achievement of a hard-won goal. In some cases, the ‘joy’ will be fleeting; where the cause of rejoicing has an enduring impact, the ‘joy’ will continue. To ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ points to a joy that is not only enduring, but that sustains us even when we are worn down by life challenges. This requires something more than seasonal cheerfulness. It is a joy rooted in an ongoing relationship, built on trust, that is able to negotiate the moments of joylessness in ways that ultimately work for good.” – Holly Hearon.

There is not guarantee that you will find \$20 in a coat pocket, nor that you will find a surprising letter in your mailbox. But the good news that we hear in this season of Advent is in one way unexpected, because it is always surprising and new; but it is also good news that is expected, that is certain and sure because it is rooted in the love of God that is steadfast, that is limitless, that abides with us always, a love that “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” (1 Corinthians 13:6). This good news is unexpected because it is rooted in God’s love and God’s ways that are unlike anything we experience in any other relationship, who calls upon all people to “*return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon*” (Isaiah 55:7). The unexpected, joyous good news that “*came upon the midnight clear*” calls out a message of light to hope to “*all ye beneath life’s crushing load whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow; look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angel sing.*”

Let us rejoice, for the good news of this season – surprising, unexpected, and joyous – is with us always. May there truly be “joy to the world,” for “the Lord is come.”

Amen.