

A Day of Singing

Zephaniah 3:14–20

Studies in Zephaniah #4

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IF you're like me, you love the Advent season because of the songs. I don't mean the Americanized and commercialized songs like "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," but I mean sacred music like ancient chant, Handel's "Messiah," or the hymns that are so full of Jesus Christ. This time of year is a time to sing as we look back to the promises of God to enter human flesh and human history in the incarnation of the Son of God and as we look forward to his return. Martin Luther wonderfully expressed the joy of singing that is apropos for this time of the year:

How strange and wonderful it is that one voice sings a simple unpretentious tune while three, four, or five other voices are also sung...anyone, having a little understanding, must be moved and greatly wonder, and come to the conclusion that there is nothing rarer in the whole world than a song adorned by so many voices...[he said in contrast:] A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.¹

We close out our Advent series through the prophecy of Zephaniah this morning. He has proclaimed the Day of the Lord as a day of judgment, as a day of conquest, as a day of conversion, and now as *a day of singing*.

¹ Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1988), 21, 33.

The Singing of the Saints (vv. 14–16, 18–20)

In verses 14–16 and 18–20 Zephaniah hears *the singing of the saints*. We saw last Lord’s Day in verses 9–13 that the day of the Lord would be a day in which the Lord would change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that they would praise the Lord. I said he was describing in an Old Testament way the change that happens when we are converted and made new creations in Christ. Now Zephaniah continues in verse 14: **Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!** We all know by experience that it’s one thing to say our praise to God, but it’s quite another to sing it! Singing is more evocative and expressive of our emotions and feelings. As one hymn puts it:

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer’s praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!²

Why sing? **The LORD has taken away the judgments against you** (v. 15). This word **taken away** speaks of annulling a legal verdict against you. For Judah it was the Lord’s own judgment in the form of the Assyrians. We’ll see what it is for us in a moment.

Why sing? **The LORD...has cleared away your enemies** (v. 15). We saw this in 2:4–3:8 in the imagery of a new Joshua cleansing the new land for the new people of God. But how would the Lord do this? Again, 1 Peter 1:10–12 says the prophets ministered not to themselves but to us in the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit is speaking to Judah in their

² From the hymn, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” by Charles Wesley.

own terms of the coming of Jesus Christ to the world. So what does this mean for us?

Look at Colossians 2:11–15 with me:

In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh [that’s the language of “clear(ing) away your enemies”]

Then he explains how Christ has done this: **by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism** [he’s saying that our circumcision is our baptism, which is the outward sign to us of the forgiveness of our sins]

And then he says **in** [baptism as the visible sign of this invisible grace] **you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.**

Now listen for the imagery of “taking away judgments” and “clearing away enemies”: **And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.**

Zephaniah is proclaiming in a way appropriate to six hundred years before the coming of the Lord that he would die and rise again so that their (our) sins would be forgiven and our enemies disarmed. Sing, brothers and sisters, because the guilt of your sins has been taken away! Sing, because you are no longer an enemy of God! Sing, because you are justified in Jesus Christ!

Why sing? **The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst** (v. 16). For Judah this was signified in the temple; for us it is shown in what the Advent season is all about: the birth of the Word who become flesh and dwell among us (John 1:14). And because he made his presence among humanity and because he is still with us by his Spirit there is a very practical and personal benefit to us. The world puts up its Christmas lights, cranks

up its Bing Crosby, and passes the Eggnog. But for us, God coming in human flesh in Jesus Christ and justifying us from our guilt means that we can say confidently: **you shall never again fear evil. Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak** (vv. 15, 16).

Some of us may be afraid of being alone this Christmas. Some of us may feel like outcasts to our families. Some of us may feel depressed because a loved one won't be there this year around the table. **Fear not.** You have Jesus Christ and that means you have everything you will ever need. He dwells in you. He walks beside you. You puts his arm around you.

Why sing? **I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors** (vv. 18, 19). Do you feel beat down by the world? That's how Judah felt. But the Lord promises to lift your head from mourning to praise!

Why sing? **I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth** (v. 19). **Outcast**; that's certainly who we are. And that's whom God draws to himself. Listen to Paul:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:26-29)

Why sing? **At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; 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** (v. 20). Jesus'

first coming means it's a time of singing in this age; and Jesus' soon coming again means let's keep it up!

The Singing of the Savior (v. 17)

Our singing is commanded; but what is so beautiful about this prophecy is that the Lord's singing is promised. It's like we're watching a children's choir practicing, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," but then all of a sudden Andrea Boceli walks in and joins the choir! So in verses 17–18 Zephaniah hears *the singing of the Savior*:

**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 by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.**

What a wonder this is! The One who is **mighty** to **save** is also humble to sing! You may have heard this past week of a Christian college professor who was suspended for saying Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Let me assure you: we do not!

The God of Islam commands absolute submission to his authoritarian will. He is *merely* a mighty one. Our God's arm is mighty; but his mouth is also filled with a melody!

He will rejoice over you with gladness...he will exult over you with loud singing.

"The LORD takes pleasure in his people," as the Psalmist says (Ps. 149:4). And this is an Old Testament expression that means for us that God accepts us in Jesus Christ. The God of Islam demands to be served; our God serves us. He came "not to be served but to serve!" (Mark 10:45)

Like a loving mother and father who sing to their children when afraid, so too our God: **he will quiet you by his love.** There is a surprise here for us. Typically when we read of God's love in the Old Testament it is the word *hesed*, which speaks of his lovingkindness, of his commitment to keep his promises. And that is so amazing, isn't it? But here the Holy Spirit inspired Zephaniah to use a different word. This love is *ahaba*, which is used of a husband's passionate love for his wife, with Jabob's love for Rachel (Gen. 29:20); it is used of a wife's passionate love for her husband, with Michal's for David (1 Sam. 18:28); and it is used of the Lord's passionate love for us his people (Hos. 3:1).

Why should we sing? Because our Lord Jesus is not only a Savior worthy to be praised, but who praises the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with us. In Hebrews 2:12 the author puts the words of Psalm 22:22 on the lips of Jesus: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." Jesus is our worship leader; let us follow him! Amen.