

## ***Message: Zephaniah 3/3 3:9-20***

### ***Introduction:***

Well, friends, we're continuing in Zephaniah. Next week we'll talk about Palm Sunday, and the week after is Easter, so we'll take a small break from the Minor Prophets for the next couple of Sundays.

But today: the last Part of Zephaniah.

And, you know, it's been sort of a drag so far. Kinda repetitive, a lot of "Day of the Lord" oracles of doom. If you're into, say, the sociology of religion, it's kind of interesting, right? These themes about how Israel's lost their identity, how idolatry has ruined them, how they and God are supposed to relate, but aren't--they can be kind of interesting to think about, and useful to compare to our own lives.

But Zephaniah is so located in Judah's history, so directed at them, that it's just hard to really connect with. I think that's different with today's passage; I think we'll be able to connect with it well, and be blessed by its hope, its promises, and its goodness.

First, let's pray!

***Prayer:******Last Week:***

Last week we ended on this ominous note. It was the Second Part of Zephaniah, oriented around the way Israel had given up their special relationship with God, its rights and its responsibilities, but how God wasn't going to give up on them. Those nations around Israel had never acknowledged God, and were trapped in the way the sin-filled world worked; they were going to get what they'd been given, and God promised Israel that their "remnant," would inherit peace, hope, rest.

***Last Week: Remnant***

This remnant idea is really, really important. Again, the idea is that God recognizes most of Israel isn't going to live for him, but some will, some will take seriously the covenant that their ancestors made with Israel, and live faithfully.

Some will be left behind, some will go into exile and be brought back. But God makes clear in Zephaniah that He'll restore Israel, that He hasn't given up on working through them, and that even when they completely give up on Him, He won't give up on them.

So let's walk through this third Part of Zephaniah, something we haven't really done with what we've already talked about.

**vv9-10:**

This last Part of Zephaniah starts with "then," which is a marker about some far future time. If the exile that's coming on Israel, and the judgment coming on their neighbor's is close, the stuff after this "then" is farther down the line. It comes after the Day of the Lord, after the oracles of judgment that Zephaniah has spent so much time prophesying.

***"Then I will purify the lips of the peoples,  
that all of them may call on the name of the  
Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder.  
10 From beyond the rivers of Cush[d]  
my worshipers, my scattered people,  
will bring me offerings.***

God promises that He'll do the work to make his people holy again, set apart for their reconciling, blessing work. He'll gather them from far away places. Cush was the Upper Nile region, Southern Egypt today, and any mention of gathering people from that part of

the world would be a call back to the Exodus, and God's freeing of His People. When God makes His People Holy again, coworkers in His saving work, it will be like a new Exodus, a new escape from generational slavery. This time, an escape from all that made them unholy, and the exile they've been under.

But notice: God is the one who will work this out. God is the only one who can. Just as God initiated His covenant relationship with Abraham, God will initiative Israel's redemption.

God is the only one who can work out salvation for Israel. The only one. Not only do they not have the capacity, they don't even have the imagination for it.

***vv11-12a:***

And the exile to come is described as something like the flood. It's described as a thing whose result is that the only ones who are left are the "meek and humble." And any "arrogant boaster," as Zephaniah puts it, is challenged to consider that, and change their ways.

***11 On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame  
for all the wrongs you have done to me,***

***because I will remove from you  
your arrogant boasters.  
Never again will you be haughty  
on my holy hill.  
12 But I will leave within you  
the meek and humble.***

And we realize that Zephaniah is calling Israel back to their oldest memories, memories from a time before Moses and Torah, memories of who God is and what God has done that they would remember even though they've forgotten Torah, neglected it for generations.

In reminding them of the flood, and of Exodus, God is offering them a way to connect with His power and his purposes for them even though they've forgotten the Law completely. He's meeting them where they are at, spiritually, even as He's promising to see them through the exile to come.

So: God meets Israel where they are et, even as he promises to see them through the exile to come.

***vv12b-13:***

***The remnant of Israel***

***will trust in the name of the Lord.***

***13 They will do no wrong;***

***they will tell no lies.***

***A deceitful tongue***

***will not be found in their mouths.***

***They will eat and lie down***

***and no one will make them afraid.”***

God promises that the remnant of Israel, those who he'll continue to work through, are not simply, you know, without sin, but are more specifically without conflict. They trust in the name of the Lord; their relationship with God is at peace, set right. They do no wrong; and for Israel, we remember the Ten Commandments, the summary of Torah, the wrong they do is always wrong against either God or others; for them to do no wrong means that there is no more conflict among them, their relationships with each other are set right. They don't lie or deceive, so they can trust one another. They eat in peace. They go to sleep in peace. And there is no one to cause them fear. Their relationships with God and with each other are safe. They are safe together. There is no deceit, no distrust, no lies, no sin to fear.

***vv14-15:***

Imagine that now; but imagine it for Israel, surrounded by their enemies, always anxious their way of life would end, their society one in which power is gathered and used so the powerful can abuse those without it, and those with it are always back-biting, too. Israel is a mess of conflict; everything that the Law was supposed to do by regulating their relationships with each other and God has been lost. They are fearful, and fools not to be, because they can't trust anyone. So to hear that those who make it through--which feels like anyone, anyone who hears Zephaniah and responds--those who make it through, who stay faithful who make up this remnant of Israel, they'll be safe with each other and with God is a miracle. And so God says, "Yes. Celebrate it!"

***14 Sing, Daughter Zion;  
shout aloud, Israel!***

***Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,  
Daughter Jerusalem!***

***15 The Lord has taken away your punishment,  
he has turned back your enemy.  
The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;  
never again will you fear any harm.***

That feeling, that good feeling that God has come

through for them, that God will make all things right for them, that they no longer have to be afraid, that'll be the status quo, and it's worth singing about even as Zephaniah prophesies it, because you know that some who heard him could almost taste it, their hope was so great.

**vv16-17:**

But even as Zephaniah speaks, we know that this isn't now, isn't soon; this is what will come following the Lord's Day, the reckoning that everyone evil is betting against, and that everyone faithful is hoping for. And Zephaniah makes it clear again, saying

***16 On that day***

***they will say to Jerusalem,***

***“Do not fear, Zion;***

***do not let your hands hang limp.***

***17 The Lord your God is with you,***

***the Mighty Warrior who saves.***

***He will take great delight in you;***

***in his love he will no longer rebuke you,***

***but will rejoice over you with singing.”***

This passage gets used devotionally all the time. And why not, right? Because there is a part of each of us

that deeply needs celebrated, ought to be celebrated--we are, after all those who God loves, who make God happy, and who ought to be listened to when we are fully listening to God. And to be told "He will take great delight in you, in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing" is something a child needs to experience from his or her parent at some point.

But Zephaniah is asking Israel to imagine a time when they feeling down, and others who aren't even God's People will turn to them and say, "Buck up. God's on your side. God clearly delights in you. You have nothing to fear."

**vv18-19:**

And God speaks, then. He tells them that those who care more about religious trappings than the relationship God has with Israel, they'll simply not be a part of God's People anymore. This passage isn't lifted up in the New Testament as much, but Paul deeply echoes its sentiment when he talks about the way all the special feasts and holidays mean nothing. And God ties this religious burden to the experience of oppression that His People have felt--and for anyone suffering under religious oppression, then this rings

even truer--but God says that both these things will, and the weakest of the weak, those most likely to be oppressed, shamed, used, will be those who receive honor:

**18 “I will remove from you  
all who mourn over the loss of your appointed  
festivals,  
which is a burden and reproach for you.  
19 At that time I will deal  
with all who oppressed you.  
I will rescue the lame;  
I will gather the exiles.  
I will give them praise and honor  
in every land where they have suffered  
shame.**

And look, none of this is quoted in the New Testament, but its sentiments are echoed all over the place. We're the ones who praise the lowliest among us, who honor the one who acts like a servant to all, who don't get caught up in ceremony that doesn't also reorient us toward Christ, who reject shame.

**v20:**

And then, a third and final reminder that Zephaniah's

word is not for “now,” for the moment he preaches is, but for someday:

***20 At that time I will gather you;  
at that time I will bring you home.  
I will give you honor and praise  
among all the peoples of the earth  
when I restore your fortunes[e]  
before your very eyes,”  
says the Lord.***

***Did this happen?***

Did this happen? Sort of. Partially. At least, there were those in Israel, those few who were not exiled, who would have seen themselves as the remnant. This would have been especially true of those who survived Babylon’s first, partial exile of Israel in 597; it would have been even more true of those who were left, if there were any, who survived Babylon’s total destruction of Jerusalem in 586. For the exiles who returned under Persian rule, and rebuilt the Temple, they may have felt like this had come true, at least partially. They would have felt as if their fortunes were on their way to being restored, and they were at least no longer ashamed. At the time of Jesus people were all over the place: some wanted to kill all the Romans

and force this to come true, some built communes and decided to make it true for themselves, some believed it metaphorically came true when they followed the Law the “right” way.

What swept through the world, and is still sweeping through it, is the belief that any historical realization of this prophecy was partial, because until Jesus returns, we’re all in something like exile, still. We’re “foreigners and strangers” in the world, as Peter puts it, waiting; or, rather, working, living in the places we’re exiled to, coming to love them and serve them, even, salting them with our mercy, but still...waiting, in trust, that just as God made good on so many promises in Jesus, Jesus will make good on the rest of them when he returns as he promised he would.

This is where our trust is tested; keeping the faith until he returns, and all the joy of the last Part of Zephaniah is made real, fully and finally. Some of us would say our safest relationships are Christian ones, and that’s good; and some of us would remember to frame our relationship with God as one in which we two are reconciled together, God and us, through the Messiah, and so we don’t live in conflict anymore. We’d talk about our sin being wiped away, and remind ourselves

that the Spirit dances over us, singing, we who are a city on a hill, a Temple, a bride dressed for her groom. But then, the realists would chime in: Well, I don't always feel close to God, and the Church deeply wounds people, and I know my own sinful behaviors, so...

And I appreciate both our voices, because they are both overcompensating, each apologetic for what they see as the misunderstanding of the other: One denying the reality of the fact that Jesus hasn't yet returned, and the world is not saved; the other denying the reality of the fact that Jesus did come, and the Church does have enormous power and intimacy with God. We live, until Christ returns, in a middle place, which is not all joy, and not all sin, and yet: We really are becoming more like Jesus all the time, and we really are influencing the shape of the world around us. We really do experience some of what Zephaniah prophesied as true; but we experience it only partially, and usually only among other believers, who even then have to be leaning on Christ's power to achieve it. But our middle place will come to an end, and what's partial will be made complete.

***Conclusion:***

So many things are expressed in today's passage.

We realize that only God can arrange for the restoration of Israel. They have sawn off the limb they were sitting on, they've given themselves completely over to idolatry and syncretism, and have forgotten who they were and whose they were. But God is going to make sure that they come through this anyway, because He loves them. He is the only agent here. The only actor.

And God isn't begrudging in today's passage, isn't resentful, God is simply committed to setting Israel back up on their feet again, for their good and their honor and their praise, simply because God loves them.

He'll take away all that they've experienced as oppression, and replace it with a restored relationship with Him and others. Fear and distrust and shame will no longer be markers of their society.

And if this sounds like what the Church is supposed to be, sounds like what Jesus did for those who trust him, it's because it basically is. We're still waiting on it's total completion, it's total realization, but we're the

ones who have inherited these promises that were made to people in a language, culture, time, and world that we can't even imagine. That's good news that comes at a good time.

If there's any application in today's message, let it be this: Let's do this better, because we have the power to. We can be a community free from fear and distrust of each other, without shame. A society in which those who we weak are honored. One in which everyone is treated as someone who God is celebrating right now, because they are who they are, and that's enough. We are so blessed as a congregation; we continue to have what we need to do what God wants us to do, we continue to experience laughter and pleasure, our reputation and esteem keeps growing, maybe we should spend more time being thankful for these things, but they are things whose engine, whose driver, is God's love for us. This last Part of Zephaniah makes it so deeply clear that it is God's love and mercy and power that drive everything Zephaniah says; it's God's love, and mercy, and power, that we collectively experience and individually experience, that is the root cause of all the goodness we bring to this place and this world around us.

Let's be thankful: set our minds to it, consider how

good God is to us, and be buoyed, carried, by the truth that we are safe in the hands of a God who loves us, each one, and all together, who still meets where we're at and will still do what needs done to see our salvation through to the end.