

Home for the Holidays

Menno Mennonite Church

December 14, 2026

Purpose: To explore the anticipation of God's kingdom even within the demanding predictions of the prophets.

Message: Even in the moments of conviction, God comes to us with the anticipation of love in the end.

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20 (I will read); Luke 3:7-18 (please read)

Synopsis: There is a mystic power to being home for the holidays, and a lot of ways and means for that to take on flesh. Each of us carry our own image of what it that means for us and how that becomes important. We might recall the distance of when that didn't work out for one reason or another, and how that changed how we felt about the holiday in the meantime.

Advent anticipation is a rehearsal of our fullest home coming: the coming to God's home of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and prepared for us from the very first. We go home to a God that rejoices over us as an anticipating parent might after a long absence. It is a thing of great beauty, especially when paired with the dire anticipation of judgement and discomfort that comes with the anticipation of prophetic declaration. There will be judgement. There will calamity. There will be fear. But there will also be home that goes beyond every promise. It is that anticipation that can animate our season and give us reason to look toward home.

Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20

¹⁴ Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem.

¹⁵ YHWH has removed your judgment;
he has turned away your enemy.
The Lord, the king of Israel,
is in your midst;
you will no longer fear evil.

¹⁶ On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem:
Don't fear, Zion.
Don't let your hands fall.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst—
a warrior bringing victory.
YHWH will create calm with his love;
he will rejoice over you with singing.

¹⁸ I will remove from you those worried
about the appointed feasts.
They have been a burden for her, a reproach.

¹⁹ Watch what I am about to do
to all your oppressors at that time.
I will deliver the lame;
I will gather the outcast.
I will change their shame into praise
and fame throughout the earth.

²⁰ At that time, I will bring all of you back,
at the time when I gather you.
I will give you fame and praise
among all the neighboring peoples
when I restore your possessions and
you can see them—says the Lord.

There are times when just reading the end will give you what you need. You might miss some of the details, the twists and turns that got you there, but the last chapter will give you the point of the story in the main. At least enough to hold your own at book club or do scrape a passing grade, hopefully on a book report (not that I would condone such behavior—read your books kids). But that is not the case with what we are sitting with today. If you were to base your 2-page summary on Zephaniah on these last verses of an incredibly short book, you would be found out because you would have missed the point. In actually this minor prophet has spent the whole of the rest of the story eviscerating Israel for its shotty, sinful behavior, pronouncing the day of the Lord was about to dawn in the most terrible ways. There is a good reason why you don't have many little Zephaniahs running around; they might live into their name sake and tell a bunch of people off. There is a lot more in common with the words of John the Baptist that we have this morning where no punch has been pulled. The message is what the bumper sticker declares: Jesus is coming and boy is he ticked.

Which is a shame. Because when you think about it that is the 2 polarities that our popular culture holds when it comes to their concept of God: Either a God who does nothing but smile lovingly and knowingly at the children no matter what the circumstances, or the angry and wrathful God whose threats are so terrifying and fate so demanding that the easiest response is to dismiss the whole thing entirely. The human impulse is what it always will be: we want a God who will come and clean up the mess that we ourselves have made in the world, and, as we are wont to do, make sure the punish those other people who are responsible for the mess in the first place. But when we come to envisioning an activist and interventionist God as we have at times in the Old Testament, we don't like what we see and would rather disapprove of a God who does what we sometimes wish that God would do—to stand and deliver and demand justice no matter what. We don't like the harshness. We don't like the idea of a demanding God. We shy away from the wrath quotient of the gospel or walk away entirely because we cannot have God precisely on the terms that we might chose. Humanity's vision of God in general is the bumper sticker version of God that never really gets a whole lot more complicated than that.

Zephaniah's prophecy complicates this view both in its view of the problem and its depiction of the solution. The Minor Prophet filled with anger, fear, and judgements turns then to the articulation of unmitigated Joy. Note too that this does not even breath the word Messiah. No metaphorical root of Jesse or the one who is about to come. It just is not there which would

seem to make it a poor fit for the work of advent. If we can't point to the Messiah now, when can we?

There is no dispute that Zephaniah brings the darkness. But he also brings the Joy. God will rejoice over you with Singing.” After all of the unrelenting judgement and dire warnings that we only got a tiny taste of this morning the whole thing ends in overflowing joy. So much so that some scholars are given to think that this coda was something tacked on here later to help it make sense and not be quite so down.

But perhaps it is precisely the darkness of thought and tone that makes this reading just the thing for the advent season. The work of advent is to make sense of that on which we wait, to the day of the Lord. God is going to do something marvelous for all of the people with an unbounded joy that cannot be contained and the present atmosphere really had not a whole lot to do with it.

There was little denying the Zephaniah world was precisely that dark. The world as they knew it was ending, much more so for the people of the covenant. The whole of the Northern Kingdom has been wiped from history 2 generations prior and there was profound danger coming for Judah. There were enemies all around and little help to be found. The storm is about to break not despite God's intervention but because of it. God's prophet says that the coming day of the Lord would bring judgment not only, or first, on the nations, but on Judah. We might wish for such a day ourselves, but we ought to be careful what we wish for. This is dark stuff; more than enough to be worrying about. But it is also the context from which the poem of God's ecstatic love also proceeds.

God's love soon gives way to “loud singing” (verse 17b) as God is almost giddy with the delight of calling those very ones that were just judged and found wanting home. The dearest divine wish is to be reunited with the people in whom he delights.

Have you hung around an airport long enough to witness people re-uniting after long absences? Maybe security and cell phones have taken this from us, but there is an utter anticipation for the one who we are waiting for. They stand on tiptoes to get a better view as people make their way around the corner. They can't sit still for the anticipation of it. And when the moment comes and the loved one comes through the doors all the love and delight comes gushing out in a spectacle of giggles, tears, laughter and exuberance. It is a fine moment to be treasured. It is finer still when you are the one doing the waiting.

The point is this is God within the anticipation of the restoration that we receive here. The God of the universe will take delight in us. YHWH will be like a proud grand parent with a camera roll of pictures ready for anyone who would like to take a look. THAT is God. What an image. It is a God who will quiet us with love, being together is simply enough for that is what it works like when there is delight with those who love. How is that for an image? How is that to understand and confirm a broader nature of God.

Does this excuse the other parts of the story? Of course not. Love like this is not cheap or easy. This comes not as the result of the Almighty God waving off human sin or winking at the wonton evil that are part of this world. Real love is not like that. For love to endure there has to be forgiveness as well. There has to be a realistic dynamic that denies neither the righteousness of the divine judge nor the ardor of the divine lover. The people were being condemned to exile, but that condemnation would not be the final word. Not by a long shot. This singing God takes delight in the forgiven. Zephaniah's prophetic imagination of God who is glad to forgive the sinful nation may remind us of a fascinating exchange recorded in the Talmud. A question is raised as to whether God prays. "What does God pray?" According to Rav (Abba Arika) in the portion of the Talmud called "Berakhot," the Lord prays, "May my mercy overcome my wrath!" ([b. Berakhot 7a](#)). In other words, we imagine that God prays that divine desire for compassion be greater than divine demand for justice, a desire that underscores so much of what we know of God. We know that we don't get the either God the judge or God the lover. We get both precisely because our relationship with God is not an either or thing. It is a both and reality.

No wonder Israel is called to rejoice and be glad, to sing and shout. So are we in this Advent season, even when the world is dark. This dark little prophet helps us see the coming Messiah in brighter tones. He is the One who satisfied God's justice, so the Judge can pardon. He is Christus Victor who has defeated the principalities and powers who ruin human life. He is Immanuel who filled the empty spot at the center of life. He is the Good Shepherd who gathers all his lost sheep into the fold. He is the creator God who will restore his whole creation, so that we can glorify God and be glorified by him.

We know the sentimentality of going home for Christmas. I would readily confess that even with decades of not being around and among immediate family on a regular basis it is these weeks where I feel the peculiarity of it all the more. It is the expectation and the normalcy of it all and knowing that you that normal does not apply to you, at least not right now. It is OK; It is

good. But it is also real. We all want to go and be with those who we most love at a time like this almost as part of our inbuilt migration toward home where we can connect to who we most deeply are, even if it is only for a visit.

But that is not the only home that we long for in these days. We long for the home that is the home of and with God, the home that is ultimately ours. We know that the way of the Lord is righteous and just—it is and shall be and must be. But so too is it revealing of a God who is anticipating us coming home too, to be and be shaped by and with God. That is the blessing of the season. That is the God on which we wait—the God that keeps the promises and makes things right. The God that has done that already by coming even to the cross saying even here there is love. Even here joy will prevail.

That is our home. That is the place we look toward and long for. May it be our home and our longing as we anticipate all that God is doing. Amen.