

December 13, 2020

Zephaniah 3:14-20

“Reasons to Sing and Rejoice!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Well, here we are already, the third Sunday in Advent. For those of you who have been around for awhile, you know that today is the day that we light the rose colored candle on the Advent wreath. The overall theme of Advent is traditionally one of sorrow over sin and Jesus who became one of us and suffered and died so that we might be forgiven. As we remember the first coming of Jesus we are getting ready for the second.

All of this is symbolized by the color purple or blue. But the third Sunday is a kind of a break where the color changes to rose as we anticipate and rejoice in the coming of our Savior and the salvation he brings. In fact, the appointed psalm for today (85:6) asks the Lord: “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” And, in a similar way, the Collect of the Day asks that our Lord Jesus Christ would “lighten the darkness of our hearts.”

There are darkened hearts that need reviving. And it sure does feel that there aren't a whole lot of **Reasons to Sing and Rejoice**. I think that most of us are really struggling for a host of reasons that hardly need listing. People seem to be generally depressed, feeling blue, stressed out, frustrated, and anxious about what has been and what tomorrow might bring. These are not words that coincide with the rose colored candle of Joy. Again, I think that the reasons are fairly obvious and don't need listing. But underneath all of the reasons is an even deeper issue. The law of God in Scripture confirms what we suspect when it says (Rom. 1:18; 6:23) that “the wrath of God is being revealed” and “the wages of sin is death.”

We often have a very unrealistic expectation about life down here and we tend to forget what this season is really all about. Jesus did not come to smooth things out but to save us and take us somewhere else. He came to do this for every generation that has ever been or will be. Peter writes in his second epistle: “... according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace (3:13-14).” Yes, we want out of this place, hopefully not in a morbid sense. Rather, we take a good look at what our rebellion against God has done, we see our own Christian struggle with self-centeredness and self-love, and we desire a real and forever change. We want things to be right with ourselves and with God and with one another.

It is exactly because of the bitter realities of life in this fallen world, and what comes as a result of it, that magnifies just how great God's salvation is for us through his one and only Son. In our Old Testament lesson for this morning we read words of the prophet that give us every reason to sing and rejoice. But go back and read what comes before this section and you will wonder if the same man wrote it. Before our text the prophet speaks frighteningly and all too clearly about the sins of God's people. He teaches of the dreadful day of his visitation on the earth and his terrible judgment. He speaks of his judgment on all those who oppose his gospel of salvation. Yet, we come to our text, which is the last chapter of the book, and we read of **Reasons to Rejoice and Sing!** Just listen to what the prophet had to say to Israel in their sorrow and what he has to say to us now:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil ... 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 is the motivation to sing, to shout, to rejoice and exult with all our heart? The answer is clearly given in this text and takes us to Jesus our Savior. The Lord has taken away the judgments against us and has cleared away all our enemies. This is the Lord's doing! Our Savior has appeared in Bethlehem and lived a perfect life for us, even suffering and dying on the cross to pay for all of our selfishness and self-love and every act of rebellion. The gift of God is forgiveness and eternal life. This means that all of the evidence of our sin and every judgment that could be pronounced has been removed. And with this wonderful relief, he has cleared away all of our enemies. Yes! Everything that is against us and would drag us down into the pit, whether it be this unbelieving world or the accusations of Satan and the work of devils, and even our own sinful flesh that incessantly works for our doom, has been conquered and cannot overturn what we have been given with Christ on our side.

The prophet reminds us that the King of Israel, the Lord, is in our midst and so we will never fear evil again. How often it is, and even right now, the joy of a believer is often dimmed and in danger of being destroyed by fear of this and that terror or uncertainty. But the Lord speaks over all the doom and gloom saying, "Do not be afraid!" And we should not be afraid. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" Paul writes, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 37-39)."

Another powerful motive for every child of God to discard all fear and to rejoice and sing is to know that the Lord is not only in our midst, but he will rejoice over us with gladness, quiet us by his love, and exult over us with loud singing. I find this incredibly consoling. We have **Reasons to Rejoice and Sing!** One of those reasons is that the Lord himself says that he will rejoice and sing over us. He will quiet us by his love, that is, he calms us down and brings us to contentment so that we are able to rest in him. This speaks a great deal about what we are going through as we wait for the second coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We want his peace. We are bid to unload our depression, blue feelings, stress, frustrations, and anxieties about tomorrow on the Lord.

And, as we unload these things upon him who cares for us and is in our midst, we forget what is behind and we push forward to that which is waiting for us in our King's eternal kingdom. As we get closer and closer to the second coming of our Savior, we have been warned that things will be tense. No doubt, that tension is in every generation. Still, we are certainly closer now than yesterday or the day before. The closing words of our text were directed particularly to the believers living in the dark decades right before the fall of Jerusalem, during the horrors of the siege, and the years in captivity. The Lord says:

Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. 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. 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. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 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 (Zeph. 3:16-20).

In our dark decades before the coming of Jesus, and during the siege against God's people in this unbelieving world full of devils, and in the years of our captivity where we long to be free, we are reminded that the Lord is with us. He will gather us who mourn for the day of our entrance into heaven so that we no longer suffer the reproach of many. The Lord will deal with all who oppress us. He will gather us and show that our shame has been covered by the garment of the righteousness of the Righteous One, Jesus! He will gather us together and give us all that has been taken away.

If those are not **Reasons to Rejoice and Sing** I don't know what are! The Lord himself has spoken and no one can stop it though they will try and try to build their tower to make a name for themselves and reach the heavens. The new heavens and the new earth will be ours. What has been all messed up will be made right in every way. God will "graciously give us all things," Paul says (Rom. 8:31-32). And Jesus told his disciples, "When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (John 16:21-22)." We need to be reminded of that, and so we have been with the rose colored candle of Advent.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott