

The Blessing Place

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 12:2-6, Philippians 4:4-7

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; 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.

Zephaniah, a minor prophet, consisted of nine prophetic oracles (that is, messages from God). Eight of these oracles were judgment against Judah and Jerusalem for their pride and failure to keep the covenant. This book was written during King Josiah's reign, a reform-minded monarch. Despite his best efforts, there was still a great deal of injustice in the land.

The ninth oracle, which is part of the lectionary readings for today, is a message of redemption and salvation—of hope. But you can't read this oracle without being aware of the warnings of judgment which preceded it. In this oracle, which is addressed to "daughter Zion," the declaration is made that God will become their ruler once again and that when that happens an earthly ruler will no longer be needed. What is of particular interest in this text is the claim that God is singing for the people.

The LORD, your God ... will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

Can you imagine this? God singing to the people. God singing to us. Can we hear it?

Isaiah 12:2-6

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. ³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. ⁵Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

This joyful passage precedes a number of judgment oracles against other nations of the earth: Babylon, Ethiopia, and so forth. This is really a Messianic text, describing what it will be like when the Messiah brings salvation to the people. The result is that the people should not be afraid; they should trust the Lord. They should also erupt in joyful song.

The good news contained in this text should not be hidden; it should be shared with the whole world, including those countries upon which Isaiah is about to pronounce God's judgment. We might say these verses should inform both our worship and our mission to the world.

I dearly loved my maternal grandfather. Although he's been gone over 40 years, I still miss him. But like us all, he was human. One way he showed his humanness was whenever there was an electrical storm he could be like a cat on a hot tin roof. He was nervous, jumpy even, because he was afraid his barn would get hit by lightning and be destroyed.

Fear is a natural, human response to perceived danger. It is a necessary defense mechanism. We couldn't survive without it.

Still, sometimes our imaginations get the better of us and we allow perceived dangers to overwhelm us.

Fear is a reflexive response, not a reflective one. It sometimes sees danger where there is none, or it magnifies the degree of danger. Sometimes the ways in which we respond to our fears simply make the situation worse, rather than better. Think about war, for instance. War seldom if ever gets rid of perceived danger and it usually makes things worse.

Our fears can be stoked. Politicians on both the left and the right play on our fears all the time. A few years ago, during Lent, I decided to give up watching a cable news talk show that just seemed to get me all riled up about things I couldn't do much about anyway. When Lent was over I didn't go back to it and haven't since. I don't need my fears stoked. I don't need my blood pressure elevated!

Some churches and preachers have a penchant for stoking their members' fears. I don't think that happens at Berkeley, but I have said already that people who go to such a church should look for another church.

We all know that "do not fear" is a repeated refrain in scripture. And it comes up in a text for this morning as well:

- "Do not fear, O Zion" (Zephaniah).
- "I will trust, and will not be afraid" (Isaiah).
- "Do not worry about anything" (Philippians).

I am reminded of John Darrow, a spiritual director in Susan Howatch's Church of England novels. Darrow told one of his directees, "Don't worry about something that may never happen." Of course it is easier said than done for some of us.

When we are overcome with fear we should:

- Take some deep breaths.
- Explore the source of our fears. Are they real or imagined? Overblown?
- Ask ourselves whether our response to these fears is reflexive or reflective. Will our responses make things worse rather than better?
- Remind ourselves that Jesus is with us through the storms of life. Jesus won't abandon us.
- Remind ourselves that we are part of a supportive community which will walk with us through hard times. I've seen this congregation do that over and over in the short time I've been here.
- I like Mr. Roger's advice, who said his mother told him, "Look for the helpers." Seldom are we without helpers, if we just look for them and let our needs be known.

Instead of putting ourselves in place which stoke our fears, I think we have choices to put ourselves in places that calm us, perhaps even make us joyful instead of fearful.

I noticed years ago that our dog tended to find splotches of sunlight falling on the floor in our house, especially in the winter. She would lie in that light. I call this "the blessing place." It's going to be different for each one of us, but I think all of us have some kind of blessing place, a place that nurtures our spirit and may even make us joyful. For me it is prayer and meditation, listening to music, singing in church or with other groups, spending time with my grandchildren. I'm not sure I could make it through this COVID pandemic without YouTube, especially when we were locked down and not able to meet in person for worship, including singing. I've listened to hours and hours of music on YouTube.

"Joy does not simply happen to us," Henri Nouwen said. "We have to choose joy, and keep choosing it every day." It's putting ourselves in the "blessing place."

The amazing thing about these text for this morning is that joy or rejoicing is that counterpoint to our fears. Yes, faith and trust are the opposite of fear. But joy and rejoicing are the antidote, the solution, to our fears.

The angels in the nativity texts in the gospels get this:

- To Mary at her annunciation, the angel said: "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God."
- When she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, the baby leapt in her womb with joy. And then Mary broke out in a joyous songs, the song we call the Magnificat.

- To Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, the angel said: “Do not be afraid.... [Because of this baby boy] you will have great joy and gladness.”
- To the shepherds in the field when Jesus was born, the angels said: “Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Because Jesus is Immanuel—God with us—we need not be afraid. Instead, we can be joyful.

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The important thing to note about this joyful passage is that Paul wrote it while in prison. He could be joyful in spite of his circumstances. He gave the church at Philippi some straightforward admonitions: *rejoice*, be gentle, *don’t worry about anything*, and pray, including supplications and thanksgivings.

I was in a Berkey committee meeting this past week where someone noted that she likes it when preachers give suggestions of things to do during the coming week, spiritual disciplines, for example. I had to admit that the sermons I’ve remembered other preachers giving almost always included a simple activity to observe in the coming week.

So here is my suggestion for you this week: read this passage from Philippians each day.

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice.