

December 17, 2006
Advent 3

"He Will Quiet You with His Love"

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of 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. ¹⁶ On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

One of the joys of the Christmas season is joining together with other people to sing the songs of Christmas. By the songs of Christmas we are not referring to the secular songs such as "Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer" or "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" or "Santa Clause Is Coming to Town." The songs of Christmas are the songs about Christ Jesus our Lord, his birth in Bethlehem, and the overwhelming love of God our Father who would give us the gift of his Son. So many of these Christmas songs that focus on our blessings in Christ speak about being joyfully. "O Come All You Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant." "Joy to the World the Lord Is Come."

In the words just read to you from the prophet Zephaniah the Lord is calling on his faithful remnant of people to sing, and shout aloud, be glad and rejoice. The reason for the shouting and singing is that the Lord God takes away the punishment of his people and he quiets them with his love.

This morning we lit the pink candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of joy, also called the shepherd's candle. What we want for Christmas is a greater joy in the blessings we have in Jesus' birth. The prophet Zephaniah tells us that our God is coming to us to quiet us with his love. Don't you just love this statement? "He will quiet you with his love." You want to say it softly to yourself: "He will quiet you with his love." You want to say it loudly: "He will quiet you with his love." You want the whole world to know, "He will quiet you with his love." You want your family to know, your friends, your children, your husband, your wife: "He will quiet you with his love."

The Lord quiets you by taking away your punishment

Notice again how the prophet encourages us to sing and be joyful. "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!" The reason for all the shouting and singing is the Lord who does something very special for you. "He has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy." Do you realize how often the Old Testament encourages God's people to sing for joy because of the blessings they have in the Lord? Psalm 95 says, "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.... For the Lord is great...He is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the flock under his care." Psalm 118 says, "Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: The Lord's right

hand has done mighty things!"

God's people at the time of the prophet Zephaniah needed to hear the good news that the Lord had taken away the punishment they deserved. Listen to how the Lord promised judgment on his unfaithful people. "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Molech." The priests of God were swearing allegiance to the Lord one day, and to the god Molech another day. If you think the ancient Mayan culture was brutal in its use of human sacrifices, that was nothing compared to the worship of Molech that involved sacrificing children in the fire. The people of Jerusalem worshipped the Lord in the temple in the morning. In the evening they sat on their roofs, looked up into the stars and called on the names of Baal and Ashtoreth. That is how far God's people had fallen away from the Lord. That's why he had then taken away into captivity. But then a faithful remnant of people repented and came back to the Lord. The prophet told them, "The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy." That was something worthy singing about and shouting about and rejoicing.

There are so many things that make us happy and fill us with joy once again this Christmas season. We look forward to being with family and friends. Over 60 million people are traveling over Christmas. We love the Christmas tree and its fresh smell of pine, the tamales and other favorite foods, the presents, and the worship services. The heart of our celebration is always Jesus. When we look into the manger in Bethlehem we see the sacrifice our God made for us to take away our punishment. The sin of the world was placed on Jesus, including our sin. The punishment we deserve from a perfect and holy God fell on his Son.

Picture yourself out in a field with a friend. A storm is approaching and there is thunder and lightning. Suddenly a lightning bolt streaks from the sky, hits your friend and kills him, but you are spared. All your life you live with the thought, "That could have been me. My friend took the full fury of the lightning bolt, but my body was spared." That's the thought in the Hebrew word for "take away your punishment." The punishment for our sin was diverted and turned and directed on Jesus. As we sing in the Christmas carol, "Nail, spear will pierce him through. The cross he bore for me and you." And with the full removal of all sin, the enemy, Satan, the old evil foe, cannot bring charges up against us. He has been turned back. As Martin Luther said in his hymn, "This world's prince may still. Scowl fierce as he will. He can harm us none. He's judged the deed is done. One little world can fell him." Romans 8:1 gives us the penultimate reason to sing for joy. "There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ." The angels on the fields of Bethlehem sang joyfully of a peace on earth, not between warring nations, but peace between sinners and a holy God. As we sing in the carol, "Peace and earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."

Our God quiets us with his love. He quiets us and leads us to sing joyfully because in the gift of Jesus His Son we have our punishment taken away. We have turned back the enemy who tries to accuse us before God's throne day and night. That's a good reason to sing joyfully, shout loudly and rejoice with all your heart.

The Lord quiets you with his powerful presence

With the punishment removed and with the peace you have with God comes the joy of knowing that the Lord is with you whatever the future brings. "The Lord, the King of Israel is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, O Zion, do not let your hands hang limp.'" Sometimes it happens that people became so afraid they are not able to move. They become paralyzed with fear. Their hands hang limp. Have you ever looked into someone's eyes and seen fear, fear of what the future might bring, fear of not being able to cope with life, fear of seeing your whole world falling apart. I have seen that fear, and I have seen that fear removed when God's people are strengthened by His Word that tells them, "The Lord, the King of Israel is with you; never again will you fear any harm."

This morning we began our worship by singing two songs that referred to Jesus as Emmanuel, which means "God with us." We sang, "Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel, shall come to thee O Israel." Jesus came to our world, with our flesh and blood, to pay the ransom price for our sin. Then he ascended into heaven to be at the right hand of the Father with these words, "Lo, I have with you always, even to the end of the world." We sing about this in the psalms. "The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress." We see the Lord holding us in his arms, the way a shepherd holds the struggling lamb and quiets it with his love and soothing presence. We tell each other without any fear in our eyes, "The Lord is with us!" "You are in the Lord's hands" This is not false hype. No matter how often we hear it, we never grow weary of someone tell us, "The Lord is with you."

The Lord who is with us is mighty to save. "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save." When you are going through troubles it is soothing and comforting to know that that someone is with you who is very good and helping you. We are told in these words that the Lord is "mighty to save." The Hebrew word for "mighty" is the word GIBBOR. It has the thought of a warrior God who not only loves his people and stands in their midst, but defends them against harm and danger. The same word is found in the prophecy of Jesus birth that includes this name for Jesus, "The mighty God." In Isaiah 43 our mighty God speaks to us with these words, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name, you are mine, when you pass through the waters I will be with you, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel." When the children of Israel came to the waters of the Red Sea, and Pharaoh's army was in hot pursuit, the Lord quieted his people with his words to Moses: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today."

If these words from Zephaniah do not thoroughly convince you that the Lord will quiet you with his love, then read on in our text and hear even more about the Lord's love for you. "He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love." How can that ever be? How can the Lord take delight in a person like me? When two people are really in love with each other, they delight in hearing each other speak, they delight when the other person walks into the room, they delight in just being together. Here it says the Lord delights in you. Your heavenly Father delights in you because he sees you covered with the righteousness of Jesus his Son. Psalm 139 does not exaggerate when it says of our God, "He has thoughts for you more countless than the grains of sand." If you ever feel sorry for yourself, take a walk along the beach, walk out to Oso Flaco, start trying to count the

grains of sand in the large dunes, or even in a handful of sand, and then remember that the Lord has thoughts for you, thoughts of love, more countless than the sand.

The Lord even rejoices over you with singing. "He will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." We rejoice over the Lord with our singing, our Christmas carols, and our hymns of praise. Here it says, "The Lord rejoices over us with singing." Think of all the great music that has been written for Christmas. None of the music that we humans have composed and lyrics written can begin to compare to the song the angels sang the night Jesus was born. Even that music is secondary to the music the beautiful songs the Lord sings to you because you are his dear children. Our human ears cannot hear these songs. We simply accept in faith what God's Word reveals to us. He quiets us with his love as we think about the Lord our God singing his songs to us on how much he appreciates and loves us. He quiets us with his love by giving us the gift of his Son. That's the true meaning of Christmas. Amen.