

December 16, 2012
Advent 3

"He Will Quiet You with His Love"

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-17

*S*ing, 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."

When I was a child I went through a time when I could not sleep at night because I was afraid. At the time there was a lot of talk about a nuclear war with the Russians. One of our relatives even bought a house with a fully equipped bomb shelter. The fears increased after seeing a Walt Disney film on how the atom bomb works. It showed a room full of mousetraps with ping pong balls on the trigger of each trap. The scientist threw a ping pong ball into the room. Suddenly the whole room was alive with traps releasing ping pong balls into the air. More than once I woke up my sleeping parents and told them I could not sleep because I was afraid of a nuclear bomb exploding at night. You might be saying to yourself that Steve Degner had a strange childhood to have such fears. More likely most of you had your own distinctive and unique fears that may have kept you awake at night.

Here you are an adult without any fears in life, right? Fear is a major part of our very existence as human beings. We double check the doors to be sure they are locked when we leave our homes. The national debt is out of control. We are at the edge of a fiscal cliff. Will I still have a job? Will I have enough money to pay the bills? What about my faith? Will I see major improvements in how I live my life for Jesus or will I start slipping down the slippery slope that so many others have faced in the past? Will my children and grandchildren always have Jesus first in their lives? The fears don't go away when you get older. They seem to get worse.

The people of God who lived at the time of Zephaniah the prophet had every reason to fear what was coming in their future. Prophet after prophet warned God's people they were in for a major correction if they did not get their act together as a nation, turn away from the worship of false gods and come back to the Lord. Looming up large in the future was the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. The people who worshipped false gods could care less what the Lord was telling them. The people who took God seriously were afraid of what the future might bring. To these faithful believers, the prophet Zephaniah says, "The Lord will quiet you with his love." So many care so little about the real meaning of Christmas. They despise those who have a little manger scene on the back of their car that says, "Keep Christ in Christmas." But you care. You care so much. Because you care you are afraid. You thrill to these words before us this morning, "The Lord will quiet you with his love."

The Lord has taken away your punishment

The Lord quiets you with his love this morning by assuring you that he has taken away your punishment. "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy." Sing! Shout! Be glad! Rejoice! It doesn't just say "Rejoice." It says, "Rejoice with all your heart!"

It is amazing how often the Old Testament calls on us to find our joy in the Lord and what he has done for us. 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." Rejoice because the Lord has made you the people of his pasture. You are a lamb resting in the arms of Jesus your Shepherd. Psalm 118 says, "Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: The Lord's right hand has done mighty things." You see the Lord's mighty hand reaching out to rescue you with a tiny baby born in Bethlehem who is your Lord and God.

If I were living at the time of Zephaniah as a child or adult I would be filled with fear at what was coming ahead in the future. Zephaniah delivered frightening messages directly from the Lord. There were messages about the end of the world such as "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth." There were messages against Judah and Jerusalem for their worship of false idols. "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 hosts." God's chosen people were offering their own children as human sacrifices to the detestable God of the Moabites named Molech. The Lord told his people: "I have had enough. I will rain destruction on this land."

Christians who live in these last days are worried and fearful of what the future might bring to our nation and to the world in which we live. Christian churches in Europe were once filled with people rejoicing in the Lord on this third Sunday of Advent. Now only a handful of old people gather and shiver in churches where hearts have grown cold. Will Jesus' prediction that the love of many will grow cold be true also for our nation? Will we continue to afflict ourselves with false teaching and immorality? Will the numbers of those who arrogantly worship their own gods in their own images continue to increase as the end draws near?

It is scary to think of what the future holds until we listen to the Lord who holds our future. He says through his prophet Zephaniah, "The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy." Look again at what the Lord has done to secure your future and take away your fear. He quiets you with his love by taking every sin you have ever committed in your life and placed it on his Son. Look at the baby Jesus. Kneel down and worship him as your Lord and God. Think of how your Father caused him to become sin for you. Look again at how the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. If Jesus were not there for us, Satan would still be able to dredge up sin from our past life and accuse us before God's throne. Now we crush our enemy with the good news that our punishment has been taken away. With Paul in Romans 8:1 we joyfully sing for joy, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." With your punishment removed, you know that the Lord is with you whatever the future brings.

The Lord is with you

Listen further to these words that quiet us with his love. "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. 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.'" The Lord, the King of Israel is with you! Martin Luther said, "Joy is knowing the king is in his castle and the flag is flying full mast." Every new day is a day to look out the window and see that your King is in his castle and the flag is flying full mast. Your king said to you in John 10, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and no one shall pluck them from my hand."

Do not let your hands hang limp. When people are paralyzed with fear, their hands hang limp. Their feet cannot move. Have you ever looked into someone's eyes and seen fear? Have you ever heard fear in their voice as you talk with them on the phone? Have you ever been so filled with fear that you just didn't know where to turn next? God's Word tells us this morning, "Do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you." This past week we said good bye to Craig Cunningham who passed away on Monday morning. In my many visits with Craig, he often confessed with great conviction and certainty "I know the Lord is always with me."

The Lord tells us that he is a mighty God. The Hebrew word for mighty is the word "GIBBOR." It is used in Isaiah 9:6 to describe the child that is born to us as the mighty God, the warrior God. Whether you are in the field of battle or playing football, or basketball or baseball, you need to be ready for whatever your opponent is throw at you. The Lord is your mighty warrior ready to take on any problems and troubles and difficulties that life may bring to you.

The Lord takes great delight in you. Do you believe that is true? I ask again, do you sincerely believe that the Lord takes delight in you? How do you know when you are in love with someone? You delight when that person comes in the room. You delight to hear their voice. You delight in just being with them. You delight in doing special things for them. The Lord delights in you. He quiets you with his love. He wants you to know that he takes great delight in you. The Lord God, your heavenly Father, delights in having you as his children because he sees you covered with righteousness of his Son and washed clean by his blood. Psalm 139 says, "He has thoughts for you more countless than the grains of sand. Try and count the grains of sand in one bucket or at the beach. It is impossible to fathom how much God loves you in Jesus his Son.

The Lord even rejoices over you with singing. He will quiet you with his love. This is not an exaggeration here. This is concrete, every day, 24/7 reality. The Lord rejoices over you with singing. We rejoice in singing about the Lord, but here its says the Lord rejoices in singing over us. This Christmas season we enjoy singing about Jesus birth. Think of all the great music that has been written for Christmas, some old and some new. Last night we were privileged to hear choirs and orchestra play portions of Handel's Messiah. In the Revelation, John tells us he was privileged to large multitude sing praises to Jesus the Lamb. "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels number thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They circled the thrones and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain...."

All the greatest music ever sung, or composed, or played cannot compare to the sounds of our Lord and God singing his praises over you his dear, dear children. Listen. What's that sound I hear? Don't you hear it with your ears of faith? Your heavenly Father is singing to you about how much he loves you. He is rejoicing over you. He is quieting you with his love. That is why he gave you the gift of his Son. Amen.