

“He Will Renew You in His Love”

Zephaniah 3:14-20 • Isaiah 12:2-6 • Philippians 4:4-7 • Luke 3:17-18

Rev. Bill Pinches

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If you were here last week you heard me talk about the biblical prophet Malachi. Today, I'm going to talk, briefly, another not-very-well-known prophet, Zephaniah. Like Malachi, Zephaniah's book is short – a mere 53 verses – but unlike Malachi, we know some details about his life. He was the great-great-grandson of an Israelite king, Hezekiah; Hezekiah had been one of Israel's most righteous kings. Zephaniah inherited that zeal for righteousness. He lived during the reign of King Josiah, more than 600 years before Jesus, during the last turbulent decades of the kingdom of Judah, before its destruction by the invading Babylonian army. Most of Zephaniah's book is a prophecy of doom and gloom, not only for Judah but also the surrounding lands; Zephaniah knew that dark days were coming for his beloved land. He attributed this coming destruction to the sins of the people and their leaders. The priests were idolatrous; the wealthy were lazy; the people were prideful, haughty, and unjust; they were unwilling to accept correction and did not trust in the Lord. The officials and judges were corrupt; the prophets were “reckless” and “faithless;” the priests had “profaned what is sacred” and “done violence” to God's law. God's indignation is great; God's day of judgment is coming; “in the fire of [God's] passion all the earth shall be consumed.” It is a book filled with darkness, and not much light.

Except ... except for seven verses at the very end. “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The 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.” It is a very sudden, dramatic change of mood, from doom and gloom to joy and celebration. It is clear – when you look at the historical events – that doom and gloom *did* come. The land was laid waste; Jerusalem was burned to the ground; the sacred temple plundered and destroyed; many of the people slaughtered and many others carried off into exile. Everything Zephaniah predicted in his prophecy of doom and gloom came to pass. So why did he also – at the end of his book – proclaim a message of joy and celebration? Why a message about “saving the lame” and “gathering the outcast” and “bringing the people home?” Well, simply put, because God had revealed to Zephaniah *two* different futures: one, coming soon, filled with doom and gloom; another one, coming later on, filled with joy and celebration. In that *second* future, Zephaniah anticipated that “the LORD, your God” would be “in your midst.” That could be interpreted metaphorically – foreseeing a time when the divine favor would be evident, like when the exiles returned to Jerusalem seventy years after its destruction – or it *could* be interpreted *messianically* – foreseeing a time when God's promised *Messiah* would literally be “in the midst” of the people. When God's promised *Christ* would arrive. You know ... *Jesus*.

The prophet Isaiah also foresaw a time when the Lord would be *in the midst* of the people: “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great *in your midst* is the Holy One of Israel.” The

Hebrew wording here is exactly the same as it was in Zephaniah; both prophets anticipated a situation in which the Lord God would be *in the midst* of the people, when the Lord God would be *among* the people, when the Lord God would be *with* the people. *God with us*. Emmanuel. You know ... *Jesus*.

Much, *much* later on, John the Baptist stood on the bank of the river Jordan, preaching to the people who were coming to him in droves, proclaiming a message of repentance, because the *Lord God* was coming soon. “One who is more powerful than I is coming,” he declared; “I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” All three of these prophets – Zephaniah, Isaiah, John – were pointing towards Jesus, paving the way for Jesus, proclaiming that the *Lord God* was coming. In John’s case, coming *very soon*. Indeed, God was *already* here; the masses just didn’t know it yet. *God had arrived on earth, in human form*. This was good news for the world, but not necessarily good news for all the individual people. Not good news for those who weren’t interested in living *righteously*. The trees, metaphorically speaking, who weren’t bearing good fruit. The ones who are greedy, the ones who are selfish, the ones who threaten other people, the ones who make false accusations – the list goes on, but those are the sins John names here. Those people should pay close heed to what John says about what the Lord will *do*. “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” If you’re living a life that is unjust, unrighteous, unloving, selfish, cruel, heartless ... be careful how you celebrate Christmas, because the coming of our Lord might not be such good news for you.

But for those who are sincere about trying to live a *good* life, a *righteous* life, filled with *justice* and *love* and *mercy*, for those who are willing to take an honest examination of their deeds and words, and earnestly strive to change those aspects of their life that aren’t worthy of Jesus, the coming of the Lord will be good news, *very good* news, indeed. “He will renew you in his love.” No matter what might be going on in your life, no matter how much suffering you or a loved one might be experiencing, no matter how much sadness or stress you are carrying in your heart, “he *will* renew you in his love.”

He is coming. He is coming *soon*. Are you ready? Not ready for *Christmas*. Ready ... for *Jesus*?

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