

Pastor Daniel Iwinski
12/13/2009
Third Sunday in Advent

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL
2:50
Zephaniah 3:14-17

God's Presence

- I. *Is not for those who prefer the world;*
- II. *but for those who need salvation.*

During the four Sundays in Advent the third Sunday has a unique emphasis. It is for this reason that today's candle in the Advent wreath is pink instead of purple. The season of Advent is a time of preparation and repentance--a time of quietness and self reflection to prepare for the arrival of Christ. Traditionally even weddings were delayed until after Advent. Today is different; today is a day of rejoicing.

Why did Christ come as a child to this world? To bring the gift of salvation. Why is Christ coming again? To bring to our reality all that we have today by faith. As such we focus on God's gifts to us today. Today the prophet Zephaniah speaks to us: **"Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!"** (verse 14).

Yet this may seem a bit strange based on the Gospel you heard. What did you hear in today's gospel? Did it sound like a sweet call to joy and freedom? What did we hear John the Baptist say? **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."** (Luke 3:7-9). How can this be a call to comfort and rejoicing? If anything these words and this calling should emphasize true repentance and possibly weeping on our part as we look at our sins.

Zephaniah's words today even when they were first spoken seemed inconsistent with events taking place. Zephaniah's words of peace and joy that you have heard towards the end of the small three chapter book of Zephaniah. After words of introduction telling us that these words are those of Zephaniah and they are being spoken during the reign of Josiah we hear: **"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the**

earth, declares the Lord." (Zephaniah 1:2-3). Again a stark contrast to the call to singing and rejoicing!

If you believed and trusted God at the time Zephaniah ministered you had very little to be happy about. By this time half of what had been the kingdom of David and Solomon was already destroyed. Most of the tribes of Israel were either exiled or so impure as to no longer be purely Jewish. Within the land the Temple of the Lord was in such bad repair that it was a disgrace to the people and an affront to God. People had strayed far from God and had created altars to false gods. Even the priests were lax in their duties and many false prophets were lying about God.

All of these however pale in comparison to how far from the Word of God the people had become. Zephaniah ministered during the kingship of Josiah, a wise and godly king of the South. It was Josiah who personally oversaw the cleansing from the land of the false altars. It was Josiah who had the Temple repaired. During the restoration of the Temple they had actually found the Bible! It had been lost. (Either the entire first five books of the Bible or the book of Deuteronomy had been found). When the Bible was read Josiah tore his robes because at the hearing of the Word of God he realized how far the people had strayed. (2 Kings 22:8 and following).

But now, knowing this, think about those harsh words of Zephaniah. What was he really saying? He was saying that God was with them and that God was going to be doing tremendous work: He was going to purge the land of evil. God was proclaiming simply that the wicked would not win but that the faithful would. God was not asleep and He was not indifferent to the evil going on. That was true then; and it is true for us today.

What do we see around us in the world now? We see a lot of people getting "into the season." But what season are they celebrating? People are willing to spend a lot of money, people are willing to maybe even throw up a Christmas tree and listen to some holiday music. But what is so conspicuously absent is Jesus. Things are so distorted at times that debates rage of what we can call this time of year. Do people at the store just wish everyone a happy holidays or do they wish them a "Merry Christmas?"

If this were not bad enough it is still rather heartbreaking to hear accounts of how badly people treat one another or how rude they are at the store sometimes fighting to get their hands on a particular item that is on a special sale and they only have a limited quantity. You have to stop and ask yourself exactly what season are they celebrating? Can someone give

a gift to another person with a spirit of joy and love knowing they had to wrestle or fight another person to buy that gift.

It is today that we as Christians must be reminded that God is in control and that He is coming again. We are not an afterthought in this world but we are the inheritors of this world. This not only comforts us but it allows us to live more boldly and lovingly.

Today God calls us to a higher standard, and He does so for good reason. God is at work in our lives because by His grace He is transforming us to be more and more sanctified in Him. We have God in our lives and we can rest assured that every time we do the right and honorable thing we are honoring God and truly being a blessing to someone else.

Today we have a better understanding of life. When the world is happy enough with that which is temporary we can strive for and focus on the eternal. Our enemy is not just lacking some perfect gift or the perfect relationship or not having our lives exactly just how we want them but our true enemy is sin and death. What does God say about this? God's words through Zephaniah are our comfort today. **"The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy."** (verse 15).

No one understands or even can understand Christmas apart from the knowledge that that baby born to Mary and laid in manger came to die for all of us. This is exactly what Christ did and why we can rejoice and be comforted.

Today you can live in the knowledge and comfort that you are forgiven, every sin, every error no matter how much it may continue to haunt you in your mind has forever been extinguished at the cross. When we have God today by faith we can take knowledge in the comfort that His words of forgiveness are true and real even if our own internal feelings haven't caught up with it.

God tells us through Zephaniah today: **"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."** (verse 17). You don't have to tell God what is wrong with the world because He already knows what is wrong and He has promised to punish every evil.

Today you don't have to inform God of what you do not have or what concerns you because God already knows. This is what it means to be quieted by God's love. God is with you; God is leading you too.

In your heart there are people God is leading you to share your faith with even more boldly. The ultimate goal of God's will for their lives has not yet come to fruition but in His grace and through your efforts it

can. There are some people that will truly surprise you because you never thought they would ever be open to the gospel or to God's grace but one day they will. Why? Because God is active in this world and God's presence is with us today. That changes our hearts, it changes our minds and it changes our behaviors. We can and do impact the lives of those around us.

This Christmas if we see some new faces here at church we are reminded that God is with us and He continues to work in the world. Tonight at our Children's Christmas Service we are going to see our children proclaim the message of God and this reminds us that God is at work in their young lives as He leads and teaches a new generation of believers. And today and this entire season after much work and meetings and prayers our congregation is in a firmer standing from an earthly perspective as people have given out of their generosity, love and response to what God has done in their lives. Here too we are reminded that God is with us. Yes, God knows, and God is with us. When we stop, look and listen to what He is continuing to do and what He has promised for our future then we understand that peace and joy that are ours right now, and we realize we truly have something to sing about! Amen.