

HERE COMES A HAPPY PROPHET

Zephaniah 3. 14-20

Philippians 1. 3-11

Luke 3. 1-6

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Rejoice! Here comes a happy prophet.

We usually do not associate prophets of the Old Testament with joy and jubilation. Zephaniah, however, makes a delightful exception. In our appointed passage for today, gladness engulfs God as well; and God is happy for the redeemed who will now experience evil no more.

In the previous chapters of Zephaniah, the scene that was painted was quite different.¹ The prophet called attention to ‘the day of the Lord’, a time when God will judge the world and his people. And just when we might think that there is no ground for optimism, Zephaniah dares to proclaim that things will take a radical turn for the better. Thanks to the Lord, there is hope. Even though the world is a total mess, and despite the fact that the people of God have failed him, he will pull them through.

Starting in verse 14 of Zephaniah 3, Jerusalem (which formerly² had been portrayed as an object of condemnation and chastisement) is now given tender names, like ‘daughter Zion’ and ‘daughter Jerusalem’; and these words of endearment are paired with ‘Israel’, a term that traditionally encompasses all the people of God. They are

¹ According to the superscription of the book (Zeph 1. 1), Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BCE), before the Babylonian exile. The passage currently being studied may, however, have been added after the exile. It differs markedly in tone from the earlier parts of the book (which are largely about judgement) and it speaks of ‘gathering’ the outcasts (3. 19-20).

² Cf. 1. 4, 12.

told to ‘sing aloud’; to ‘shout’; to ‘rejoice’; and to ‘exult’. As these verbs are repeated³, we can almost hear the sounds of sustained celebration.

What accounts for this sudden jubilation? Zephaniah attributes it to the Lord (Yahweh), the one who has guaranteed salvation. God has forgiven his people. In the preceding chapters of Zephaniah, Israel’s sins are described, and we see that she was guilty of syncretism (1. 4-6); complacency (1. 12); corrupt leaders (3. 3-4); and injustice (3. 1, 5). But now God has removed Israel’s guilt; and those who used to bring charges against God’s people are there no more. Yahweh the king of Israel is going to shield the people of God from disaster and evil.⁴

In this new state of bliss, the forgiven sinners receive words of encouragement and are told not to fear. Elsewhere in the Bible, ‘Fear not’ is often used as the formula that announces God’s appearance;⁵ and Zephaniah reminds the people of the coming of the gracious Lord, who will save them from the debilitating effect of fear.

The prophet’s explanation of what God *does* is based on who God *is*. Firstly (in verse 15), the prophet praises the compassionate God as the king of Israel. Although some of us may struggle to imagine what it must have been like to live under the rule of a king, the king took an all-encompassing role in the monarchic society and determined the quality of life of the people who live in the realm. Zephaniah proclaims that in the future, Yahweh, the king, will make a peaceable world for the redeemed.

Secondly (in verse 17), God is presented as a warrior. The depiction of God as a militant figure may sound antiquated or jarring or even dangerous. This warring figure, however, does not go to war to pillage and plunder. The Divine Warrior comes and delivers the people of God who have nowhere else to turn except to God.

³ These doublets of verbs are cases of ‘hendiadys’, the ancient rhetorical device of saying one thing with two words.

⁴ The literal translation of this word in verse 15.

⁵ Also known as a ‘theophany’; cf. Gen 15. 1; 21. 17; Ex 20. 20.

And as God accomplishes these things for us, he himself rejoices. Verse 17 tells us that ‘The Lord, your God, is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness...he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of a festival’. Human beings are not the only ones who are filled with joy; God, too, bursts into song! Why? Because the relationship is restored. The love between God and Israel is renewed. In verse 17, we hear strong echoes of the biblical metaphor that pictures the relationship between God and Israel as a love relationship and a marriage.

Such joy is not subdued; it is not quiet or dignified. The Hebrew words used in verse 17 are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe great jubilation. The Lord rejoices over his beloved, over Judah and Jerusalem, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isaiah 62. 5). As David danced in front of the Ark of the Covenant in exultation, so God rejoices over his people (2 Samuel 6). As the morning stars sang at the creation of the world, so God sings with elation over his beloved (Job 38. 7).

We are accustomed to images of God as judge (and indeed, much of Zephaniah uses such imagery). But how often do we imagine God as one who rejoices? As one who rejoices and sings *over us*? Yet here, in our text, God and God’s people alike are caught up in a joy that overflows into song, a joy that springs from love renewed, a relationship restored.

This joy is not one-sided. It is not simply God's people who rejoice because God has forgiven and restored them. That is an altogether understandable reaction to God's redemption. God, too, sings and shouts with joy over this love restored. The divine heart overflows with jubilation!

In the last few verses of our passage, the image shifts one more time, to God as shepherd, gathering the lame and the ones who have strayed, and bringing them home again. The Lord will give them a name (that is, renown) and change their

shame into praise, in the sight of ‘all the peoples of the earth’. What’s more, this vision of restoration is not relegated to a distant future; God says, ‘I will restore your fortunes before your eyes’. If it is not already in sight, it will come true very soon.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, also known as the Gaudete Sunday⁶ or Joy Sunday, we light the pink candle, so that we may not lose sight of the delight of Christmas during the sombre penitent period of Advent. This Sunday, we speak of joy, the joy of a people redeemed and restored, but also the joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world. Advent, after all, is not about self-mortification but about looking forward to the good news of the birth of Christ. As Zephaniah tells us in verse 17, ‘The Lord, your God, is in your midst’. Our God does not watch us from a distance, but enters into the life of the world. Our God enters even into human flesh, in the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation.

Joy to the world! The Lord is coming.

Amen.

⁶ ‘Gaudete Sunday’ is taken from the introit used on that day, which begins with the following words: Gaudete in domino semper (‘Rejoice in the Lord always’; cf. also Ps 84. 1-2 and Phil 4. 4-5).