

ZEPHANIAH: God's Transforming Joy

Sunday, August 11, 2019

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Flipping houses is one of the fastest growing hobbies in the United States today. Flipping houses involves buying a property, renovating it, and selling it for a profit. House flippers take homes that most homebuyers aren't able or willing to renovate and improve them to the point where they meet buyer demand. Most homebuyers want a house that's move-in ready, but house flippers recognize the thrill of the transformation. Taking a house that's run-down and making it into someone's dream home can be very rewarding. The joy comes through the transforming event.

God is in the transformation business, too. In Zephaniah's day, God's people needed a serious life makeover. So, God spoke to the people of Israel through the prophet, promising them that a real and life-changing transformation is coming.

The prophecy begins: *"The word of the Lord came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi...in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah."* Josiah reigned in Judah about 80 years after the Assyrian invaders swept away the northern kingdom of Israel. During that time the people in the southern kingdom of Judah sank deeper into sin and rebellion against the law of God. In the 18th year of Josiah's reign Hilkiah the priest found a copy of the book of the law. When Hilkiah read it to the king, Josiah despaired. He recognized how far Israel stood from God. Josiah humbled himself before the Lord and tore his clothes and wept (2 Kings 22:19).

Over the next 13 years Josiah directed an amazing transformation in Judah. He renewed the covenant between God and the people (2 Kings 23:3). He removed all traces of foreign gods from the temple, burned their statues in the fields of Kidron, deposed the idolatrous priests, and broke up the various religious cults (23:4-5, 7). Then the king reinstituted the Passover Festival, ignored since the days of the judges (23:22).

So, as we read Zephaniah's words, we should hear them as a call for transformation; a change of heart and mind and action that God desired for all God's people. Chapter 1 begins with a warning to Jerusalem and a prediction of the coming day of the Lord in wrath. *I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord. "I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will overthrow the wicked; I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," says the Lord. "I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests* (1:2-4).

God had good reason to be angry with the people. The court officials and the king's sons dressed and acted like foreign princes, wanting to imitate the nations which did not know God (1:8). Servants filled their master's homes with violence and fraud (1:9). The people became self-righteous and self-satisfied, saying their hearts, *"The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill"* (1:12). They ignored God. God ceased to be a practical reality in their lives.

This warning is followed by an earnest call for repentance. Zephaniah offers hope for those who return to God: even if the humble can't avert the final wrath of God, they may at least be hidden when the terrible day of the Lord comes. *Come together and hold assembly, O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the wrath of the Lord. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the wrath of the Lord* (2:1-3)

Zephaniah's criticism is not limited to Israel, however: he warns the surrounding nations as well (2:4-15). God's judgment is coming upon the whole world: *"This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they scoffed and boasted against the people of the Lord of hosts"* (2:10). Pride separates humankind from God, and God will humble the people. But lest the people in Jerusalem gloat over the judgment of the nations, Zephaniah comes back to them and in with one last indictment: *"Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God"* (3:1-2).

Following these divine indictments, as so often in the prophets, comes an amazing shift. God balances the impending destruction with the transforming power of God's love. Despite the worldwide outpouring of wrath, God promises to perform two great acts of mercy (3:9-20).

The Promise of a Global Awakening. First, God is going to cause a global awakening so that people from all the nations will turn to God. God will not be content merely to destroy the nations of the world; God aims to be Lord over those nations. *"For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; in the fire of my jealous wrath all the earth shall be consumed. At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve [God] with one accord"* (3:8-9).

God intends to pour God's righteous indignation on the nations and consume the earth with God's jealous wrath, and at that same time purify the people so that they will call on

God's name and serve God together. God will change them, transforming their hearts, and giving them clean lips with which to call on God's name.

The Promise of Revival and Purification. The other act of mercy in these verses is the revival and purification of God's people Israel. God will remove the proud and leave only people who are humble and lowly; people who trust in the name of the Lord. *On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall take refuge in the name of the Lord* (3:11-12).

Not only is God going to gather a people from all the nations of the world, God is also going to purify the people of Israel as an example to others (cf. John 11:52). God will transform the people, and through them God will transform the world. The clue to the promised transformation comes in 3:17: *The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; [God] will rejoice over you with gladness, [God] will renew you in [God's] love [God] will exult over you with loud singing.*

The Lord, your God, is in your midst. We often heard these words of Zephaniah during Advent as a prophesy of the coming of Jesus. God, in the person of Jesus, was pleased to dwell among God's people. God came to be amid God's people and remains with us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

God is *a warrior who gives victory*. Jesus came to show us a new and better way to live, a way of love and peace and justice. With his death and resurrection, Jesus is victorious over sin and death. He is a warrior who triumphs through right, not might. His victory for us is new life now and eternal life later.

God will rejoice over you with gladness: This new life of love and service is proof of a people transformed. When the people and the nations live together in harmony, God rejoices. When peace and justice reign, God is glad. God, the proud parent, is bursting with pride and joy over this transformed people, "over you," says the prophet.

God will renew God's love in you: This transformation is possible because God renews God's love in each of us. When they hear for the first time of God's love for them, some people are skeptical. Others think they are unworthy of such love. But God's love is for everyone. The transforming power of God's love comes from it being given unconditionally: you can't earn it or buy it. It is given freely, through grace.

God will exult over you with loud singing: Can you imagine what it would be like if you could hear God singing? With a spoken word, God brought the universe into existence. Now, as God sings, a new heaven and a new earth will be created. God says in Isaiah 65: *Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth...I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy* (vv. 17-18). When God's people live as God intends, God sings! God rejoices with all God's heart and with all God's soul (cf. Jeremiah 32:41)! God sings when God's people are transformed.

Can you feel the wonder of this? That God is rejoicing over you with loud singing? That God's love for you is made manifest in the new life offered through Jesus Christ? That God is doing a transforming work in you through the power of the Holy Spirit?

If you're having trouble making the connection, verse 12 provides the answer: The Lord says "*For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord.*" When you take refuge in God's name, God exults over you with loud singing. If you seek your own glory, promote your own name, and bank on your own righteousness, then truly you have your reward on earth. But if you humble yourself and seek the glory of God above all things, and if you hide your name in the name of God, and if you clothe yourself with the righteousness of Jesus, then God will reward you beyond all imaginings and exult over you with loud singing.

So, put aside all pride and boasting. Take refuge in the name of God. Put your hope in the righteousness of Christ and not your own. Accept the loving transformation that God's Spirit is in you. Serve God and each other with gladness. Let yourself awaken to the wonder that the Lord, the King of kings, rejoices over you with gladness and exults over you with loud singing.

Prayer: Transforming God, here I am. I trust that you have an incredible plan for me. Transform me. Transform my life. Everything is on the table. Take what you want to take and give what you want to give. Transform me into the person you created me to be, so I can live the life you envision for me. I hold nothing back. Show me how I can best serve you and others, for I would be a disciple of Jesus, empowered by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources:

- John Piper, "The Pleasure of God in the Good of His People." Retrieved July 11, 2019. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-pleasure-of-god-in-the-good-of-his-people>.
- Matthew Kelly, *Rediscover Jesus*, Dynamic Catholic Institute, 2015.