

Waiting for the Joy-Giver!
Zephaniah 3:14-20

The prophet Zephaniah may have been the saddest, maddest, and gladdest of all the ancient prophets. In three short chapters of 53 verses, Zephaniah spans the entire gamut of human emotion, from deepest sorrow through fiercest anger to unequalled exaltation.

Yes, if you read Zephaniah's little prophecy you will soon see he was saddened by the enormous evil he saw so prevalent among the people of his day. For there was idolatry, violence, fraud, and complacency among the people. In addition, among the ruling classes, there were rapacious officials, corrupt judges, faithless prophets, and profane priests. Things were truly a terrible mess!

Yes, if you read Zephaniah's little prophecy you will soon see he was saddened by the enormous evil he saw so prevalent in his day. But his sadness soon turned to anger, making Zephaniah not only one of the saddest but also one of the maddest of all the ancient prophet. And he was convinced God shared this anger with him. So, he said angry things like these: "The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah...I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord...I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth." (Zep. 1:1-3, 17-18)

Wow! Have you ever heard such anger in the mouth of God or of God's prophets? I wonder how much of that was an expression of God's righteous indignation and how much was an expression of the prophet's own frustration. But it seems God was angry and we moderns have a hard time with divine anger; probably because we dress our own anger up in the garments of God to justify it and then do terrible things against others in God's holy name. But most of us recognize that anger is, in some circumstances, right, and good, and proper. When terrible evils are perpetrated against the innocent, or when those we love behave in harmful or self-destructive ways, then anger is an appropriate response. In fact, anger is an expression of love under such circumstances as these. So, God is justifiably angry when we act in ways that bring harm to ourselves, to others, or to the creation he loves.

Be that as it may, anger is never God's final word – joy is – the joy of salvation – the joy of God restoring us and all creation to the harmony he intends! That's why Zephaniah is not only the saddest and maddest of all the prophets. He is the gladdest of them too! After giving vent to his sadness and his madness in the first two and a half chapters of his three-chapter book, he gives voice to his gladness in the final few verses of it. In fact, he sings a little song of joy to bless the world!

“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. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.” (Zep. 3:14-20) Oh my goodness, what a lovely little song!

You see, God may hate the ways we abuse ourselves, abuse his good earth, and abuse each other, but he doesn't hate us. Instead, he comes to us with compassion to take away the judgements against us, to rejoice over us with gladness, to renew us in his love, to save us and bring us at last to his home.

Now we Christians believe God came in Christ to do all these things and so much more! He is the great Joy-Giver – come to give us the joy of God's salvation! That's why we sing aloud in this season! That's why we shout, rejoice, and exult with all our hearts, because we know that in Christ, by Christ, and through Christ, God has come to save us! In the words of Zephaniah, “The Lord has (come and) taken away the judgments against (us), he has turned away (our) enemies. The...Lord, is in (our) midst; (and we) shall fear disaster no more!” (Zep. 3:15) This is our hope and our happiness, in Advent and forevermore! Amen!