

Zephaniah 3:14-20. Context. Zephaniah was an older contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk, and his lineage links him to one of Judah's most important reforming kings, Hezekiah (715-687 BC; under Hezekiah Jerusalem was spared from destruction by the Assyrians). Zephaniah flourished in Jerusalem in the early years of the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BC), who recaptured the lands both of the northern kingdom of Ephraim and of Judah which had been controlled by Assyria, and instituted sweeping religious reforms, more far-reaching even than Hezekiah's. Most of Zephaniah's 9 oracles proclaim the coming day of the Lord, a great and terrible day when God would bring down judgment against all who had broken the covenant and turned their backs on God. Zephaniah made it clear that this terrible judgment would fall both on Israel for having forsaken their covenant, and on all the other nations for their inhumanity, cruelty and injustice. The Day of the Lord would bring sweeping, total, and utter annihilation of the monuments of human pridefulness. Drawing on the image of temple worship, he proclaims that sinners would be offered up in sacrifice. This week's reading is the last oracle in the collection, where Zephaniah turns from judgment to promise, from terror to joy. The oracle concludes with a promise of restoration and return that was likely added by an editor in the period after the Babylonian Exile.

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.

Reflection. While Zephaniah's vivid description of the coming judgment day is perhaps the most well-known feature of his prophecy, he also reveals a "post-judgment" vision of renewal and rejoicing, not just among the survivors of Israel, but also together with the survivors of all the other nations. This "new world order" will be based on humility before God and obedience to God's commands, no matter the ethnic group: all will have an equal standing before God. By implication, we can only be the human beings that God wants us to be when we widen our circle to include everyone and embrace our common humanity. What are some of the barriers that prevent us from including everyone in our circle, and what might be some of the ways of overcoming them?

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Isaiah 12:2-6. Context. This week's psalm is found in the book of Isaiah and follows on the words of the prophet that promise rescue and salvation from Zion's enemies and the coming of a descendant of David who would govern with justice for all (composed perhaps around 730 BC). It is a fitting chorus-by-anticipation to the words of the Lord recorded in Zephaniah above.

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Reflection. This week try singing at least once every day the song: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart to stay!" If you don't know the tune, just check it out here: <http://freekidsmusic.com/traditional-childrens-songs/joy-joy-joy-joy/>.

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Philippians 4:4-7. Context. Last week's reading from the opening of the letter to the church at Philippi captured the joy Paul had experienced through his relationship with them. They seem to have been the

Christian community that was most supportive of his ministry, and the most expressive of the love and unity that resulted from their fellowship in the Gospel. This week's reading from chapter 4 returns to the theme of joy, a joy that comes from knowing God's love and grace. The "gentleness" of which Paul speaks is perhaps better understood as "generosity" or "consideration for others," a characteristic that Paul has already attributed to Christ himself. Of course, unguarded generosity can make one vulnerable, especially in a hostile environment; so Paul reminds them that Christ is always with them, and they need not worry but need only pray. And the fruit of that prayer will be God's peace.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Reflection. A popular song some years ago proclaimed "Don't worry, be happy." But that's pretty hollow advice and life can be pretty scary, if we don't already have the assurance that God loves us - especially when we fall short of God's expectations. Our true happiness - our joy - is knowing God's love as we experience it through our relationships with others: it's not based on having things. If you don't get all the presents you were hoping for at Christmas, will you still be happy?

Luke 3:7-18. Context. The message of judgment preached by John the Baptist in this week's lesson is common with the other gospel writers: God is no respecter of persons, but only of deeds, the "fruits of repentance." What is different in Luke's version of John's preaching is the additional dialogue between John and the crowds: his message may be one of judgment, but when people show a genuine interest in repenting, in changing their ways, John gives them very practical advice. In general, John tells them to share their resources, their food and clothing, with the poor. And when tax collectors and soldiers, two groups in society particularly reviled for their injustices, ask his advice, he gives it! He's more concerned that they repent than that they be punished.

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflection. John the Baptist's advice is very simple, practical and doable: share; be fair, be satisfied with what you have. The alternative: "burn with unquenchable fire," is a metaphor for the eternal death that awaits all who ignore or reject God's claim on their lives. The "unquenchable fire" could also be thought of as "insatiable acquisitiveness:" if only I had , a state of mind that compels those who have everything to want even more. It could be argued that we who live in the "First World" already have everything, but we want even more. If we as a society can't learn to reign in our patterns of consumption, the prospect is not only "global terrorism" of the have-nots against the haves, but also catastrophic ecological disaster. So where do you want to start?