Zephaniah is not exactly a household name. He was a contemporary of the well-known prophet Jeremiah. Both men worked during the dark years that led up to the Babylonian captivity. Both men warned the people about God's judgment. Both men had ties to the royal family of Judah. In fact, Zephaniah was a descendant of good King Hezekiah himself.

While Jeremiah's prophecy stretches over 52 chapters, the book of Zephaniah is limited to 53 short verses. Different portions from Jeremiah are read from the lectern on a regular basis. Zephaniah is included as one of the Sunday lessons only once every 3 years. That means we are not likely to hear from Zephaniah again until the year 2021.

That helps to explain why Zephaniah is listed among the minor prophets of the Old Testament. He is a minor prophet, but not because he was unimportant or because his message was irrelevant. Zephaniah is a minor figure only in the sense that we do not have much information about him. We have the book that bears his name, 3 chapters worth, and that is about it. Even though many of the details of Zephaniah's life remain hidden from us, it is our privilege this morning to uncover some of the treasures contained in his book.

So on the third Sunday in Advent, as our anticipation grows, as the day of our Savior's birth draws closer, Zephaniah reminds us again that the birth of Jes fills our hearts with joy. Therefore, we rejoice, not just during Advent, not just during the Christmas season, REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS! Sing - because the Lord has taken away your punishment. Shout - because the Lord has turned back your enemy. Be glad - because the Lord is with you.

First impressions are important. Whenever we meet someone for the first time, it is only natural to want to make a good impression. We put our best foot forward. We try to project a positive image.

As you listen to the opening verses of Zephaniah's book, what is your first impression? He writes: 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.

The Lord did not say nice things about his chosen people because he really did not have anything good to say. The time for patience had passed. The time for judgment had come. Zephaniah continued: The great day of the Lord is near - near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord.

As far as prophets go, Zephaniah was heavy on the law. He was not the bearer of good news. God's people had turned away from the Lord and the time had come to pay the consequences. Because of the tone of his message, Zephaniah probably was not very popular either. When people saw him coming, it is entirely possible that they attacked him or ran the other way.

But first impressions are not necessarily lasting impressions. In the text for today,
Zephaniah's tone is entirely different. You can feel the joy in these words: **Sing out, Daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, you Daughter of Jerusalem.** This is not the Zephaniah of chapter 1. This is Zephaniah, the messenger of the gospel, the preacher of good news. He is filled with joy and he is looking for others to share his joy with him. **Sing! Shout! Be glad! Rejoice!**

The first joyful response is to sing. We can relate to that. We sing at least 4 hymns every Sunday. We sing from the psalms. We sing from the liturgy. The children sing. The choirs sing. The Lutheran church is a singing church.

But the singing that Zephaniah encourages is more than that. It is more than singing hymns out of the hymnal. It is more than singing songs practiced to perfection in rehearsal. God loves to hear the spontaneous songs that spring from the heart. The unplanned praises that come out of our mouths are beautiful music to his ears.

Why do we sing? Why do we sing God's praises, especially at this time of year? Zephaniah has the answer. We sing because **The Lord has removed the judgment against you.** This was true for Israel. Even though God's judgment was near, even tho the nation would be all but destroyed, their punishment would not last forever. God promised to preserve his people. God renewed his promise to send a Savior.

We sing God's praises for the exact same reason. We are no better than the people to whom Zephaniah preached. We are guilty of the same sins. We deserve the same fate. But the Lord has taken away our punishment too. Instead of punishment, he has given us a gift. That gift was one of a kind. That gift was priceless. That gift came wrapped in swaddling clothes. That gift was God's only Son. Jesus removed our punishment forever when he came into the world. He took our sins to the cross. He buried them in the tomb and our punishment is gone forever. Because the gift of salvation is ours, we rejoice and sing.

But our response to God's grace does not end with singing. Because of what God has done for us, we will let others know about it. We shout from the rooftops. We shout for joy because the Lord has turned back our enemy.

The word translated **shout aloud** is used a number of different ways in the Old Testament. Sometimes it is a cry of distress. Other times, it denotes applause. In Joshua 6, the same Hebrew word is used for a war cry.

When the Israelites came up against the city of Jericho, the Lord gave Joshua a unique battle plan. For 6 days, God ordered the armed men of Israel to march once around the city along with the priests and the ark of the covenant. On the 7th day, God's orders changed. The army marched around the city in the same manner, except this time they circled the city 7 times. Then the priests sounded their trumpets, the people gave a **shout**, the walls collapsed and Jericho fell.

Zephaniah encourages us to do the same. We are to **shout aloud**, but for a different reason. At the time of Joshua, the people of Israel shouted and then the Lord delivered their enemies into their hands. We raise our voices and shout out loud because the Lord has already destroyed our most dangerous enemy. Jesus took on Satan and won. He resisted the devil's temptations. He crushed the serpent's head and his victory is ours.

I was once at a Jesus Cares Christmas service – those who are mentally challenged. It was a wonderful service. The Jesus Cares students presented the Christmas story to a church full of people. And there was more than a little shouting and clapping.

As I looked down from the balcony, I was experiencing two very different emotions. On the one hand, I was filled with joy because I was worshiping with fellow Christians. Once again, I heard the good news that a Savior had been born. I was amazed by the enthusiasm and the emotion of the students as they proclaimed the gospel through Word and song. It was
like they had just heard it for the first time.

I also experienced some feelings of guilt. Some questions that ran through my mind: Is my heart filled with the same joy? Do I have the same child-like faith that Jesus calls for or does adult-like pessimism dominate my thoughts? Do I show the same kind of energy and excitement or is my response to God's Word often one of apathy?

My heart is not always filled with joy. There are days in my life when faith gives way to doubt. I am guilty of taking God's gifts for granted. But when I look to the Lord, when I read his Word, when I hear the Christmas gospel of Luke 2, the feelings of guilt fade away. Because the Lord has forgiven our sins, because Jesus has defeated our enemies, we can rejoice. Rejoice and be glad. Be glad because the Lord is with you.

Zephaniah gave his people a similar promise: Israel's king, the Lord, is in your midst! The phrase, king of Israel, occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament. Most of the time, it is a reference to an earthly ruler.

It was a king of Israel who chose to forsake the Lord and sought the counsel of a witch instead. It was a king of Israel who committed adultery with one of his subjects and then committed murder to cover it up. It was a king of Israel who was blessed with great wisdom and great wealth, but he turned away from the Lord to worship idols. And these were some of Israel's better kings.

In this verse, however, the king of Israel could not be more different. It is no earthly ruler. It is the Lord himself. The Lord I the king of heaven and earth. He rules over all things for the good of his church. During this season, we look forward to the advent of our King.

Advent can refer to one of two comings. Jesus comes to us at Christmas as a baby born to Mary and Joseph. And Jesus will come again as our King on the Last Day. For now, we stand between the two comings. We remember the first and wait for the second. But while we are here waiting, we have the assurance that the Lord is always with us.

Just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus told his disciples: And surely I am with you always until the end of the age. That promise makes us glad. That promise leads us to rejoice. That promise means that we are always protected. It assures us that we have nothing to fear. That promise guarantees that we are never alone.

The theme for this sermon was taken directly from the epistle lesson for today. Paul proclaimed: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! When we examine our lives, when we look at our new life in Christ, there are many reasons for us to rejoice.

How does our joy express itself? We sing. We sing God's praises because the Lord has taken away our punishment. We sing Advent hymns this morning, knowing that in only a few short days we will sing: Joy To The World, The Lord Is Come.

We shout. We give a triumphant cry because the Lord has turned back our enemies. And we raise our voices with the Christmas angel who proclaimed to the shepherds: Today in the town of David a Savior was born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

And finally, we are glad. We are glad because the Lord who has come and will come again has promised that he will never leave our side. Jesus is coming. Rejoice! Amen.

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