

Zeph 3:14-20; Is 12:2-6; Phil 4:4-7; Lu 3:7-18

3rd Sun in Advent – Joyfully Bear Fruit

Each of our Advent candles this year is being lit with the words of the prophets spoken into the sanctuary: Jeremiah, Malachi, Isaiah.

The best reason to HOPE is God's faithfulness.

Depend upon God's deep, abiding LOVE for you.

By God's love, we receive Jesus' gift of rescue from sin and we experience true JOY.

Today, Zephaniah preaches consolation and comfort after severe punishment. Zephaniah spoke out in the 7th c BC from the city of Jerusalem, in Judah. We in 21st c N America are so comfortable – so protected from threats – that we cannot hear the prophet's words with the same impact they had in those days.

Little Israel/Palestine was overrun by invaders in their power struggles – Egyptian armies, then Babylonian then Assyrian. It was not Rome in Zephaniah's time. It was the major power-brokers of the ANE. By the time Jesus was born

in Bethlehem, there was a whole new regime of oppressors – same game, different players. Judah’s ruler sat in Rome.

We have not experienced such loss and destruction in the cities and the countryside of the United States. We have not been conquered and made to serve a resident foreign power. As a result, we must pry ourselves out of this comfort-zone of ours and try to put ourselves in that time and place. Not easy. We have fears and anxieties, but they are not like those in Zephaniah’s time and place.

All the prophets preached against the complacency of the rich – and the general laxity of government, business and religion. Jerusalem, the seat of the great temple of the Lord, had begun to mix in features of the old pagan religions of the region. Abominable practices and false preaching – bowing down to idols and turning away from the Creator God. Think of astrology, various Hindu charms and amulets taken on in our time. Seances, Ouija boards, tarot, and various superstitions creeping into

peoples' lives, into their homes and finally into their beliefs and values.

Meanwhile, fear reigns in the countryside where terrorism and destruction are brought on by the armies of foreign nations. Zephaniah brings the news nobody wants to hear. Thus says the Lord: "You are receiving this punishment on account of your disbelief and your wicked ways."

So remind me, why are we lighting the Joy Candle today?

It's the Reason for the Season! Jesus Christ – the anointed Ruler, Priest, Messiah, Kinsman Redeemer. His entry into the mess of human history marks the beginning of the great reconciliation of God with God's creation. While you may admire the winter solstice, you do not worship the sun, nor the earth, nor any feature of the cosmos. You worship the Creator God. He alone has power to give each of us here, and each human being, animal, tree, river, ocean – the gift of abundant eternal life.

What a relief! What joy! The burden is lifted. We do not face the vast darkness of eternity

alone – we are given recourse – we are defended against an eternal death sentence. The Worthy Lamb has been born! Hallelujah!

So sing, Daughter Zion!

Raise the rafters, Israel!

Daughter Jerusalem,

be happy! celebrate!

God has reversed his judgments against you

and sent your enemies off chasing their tails.

From now on, God is Israel's king,

in charge at the center.

There's nothing to fear from evil

ever again! (Zeph 3:14-15 MSG)

This birthday party we are planning as the people of God, the church, is exactly what is called for! Make it a great time of rejoicing and praise. Do all you can do to sing out God's glory for the things He has done.

John Baptist gives the people crowded around their marching orders for living out the New Covenant. Nobody, he tells them, is born "saved" on account of being a son or daughter of Abraham. Stones will shout God's praise if you

do not. Like a barren tree, the unfruitful life will be cut off – chopped down – burned up.

John gives those who ask a new direction in their lives:

Be generous to those who lack food and covering

Do not understate your income on your taxes,

and do not take more than your fair share

Do not lie and cheat to get ahead – be content

with your pay (*cf* Lu 3:10-14).

John gives wise, godly counsel (or exhortation)

for becoming a fruitful tree – lean on the

promises and the divine provision Christ gives.

Don't be afraid to live out godly ideals and godly

behavior. You may not always feel comfortable

shouting “Praise the Lord!” But your life bears

fruit one way or another.

Jesus says, “Each tree is known by its own

fruit...The good person out of the good treasure

of the heart produces good, and the evil person

out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of

the abundance of the heart that the mouth

speaks.” (Lu 6:44-45) The writer of Hebrews later

says: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us

continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-the

fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (Heb 13:15).

Always be full of joy in the Lord; I say it again, rejoice! ⁵ Let everyone see that you are unselfish and considerate in all you do. Remember that the Lord is coming soon. ⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank him for his answers. ⁷ If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in...Jesus. (Phil 4:4-7 TLB)

May our fruitfulness in praise and prayerful action bring us joy – at Advent – at Christmas – and always.
Amen.