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Advent 3 – Zephaniah 3:14-17 – Advent Joy

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Here at Good Shepherd, throughout much of our Wisconsin Synod, and throughout much of traditional Christianity, we follow the seasons of the church year. Just a couple weeks ago we celebrated the coming of a new church year when the calendar turned to the season of *coming*, Advent. All throughout the month of December our anticipation grows as we look forward to celebrating Christ's coming, and that's really highlighted this week with such an emphasis on joy. If you've noticed our Advent wreath, you see that this week we lit the pink candle. It stands out from the rest of the blue ones, because this week stands out in our remembrance of Christ. It doesn't focus so much on preparation and repentance like the other weeks of Advent; no, this week traditionally is called the Sunday of *Gaudete*, the Latin word for "Rejoice!"

No, we're not singing "Joy to the World" just yet – that'll have to wait a couple weeks. But as the coming of our Savior approaches, there's nothing better that characterizes this celebration than joy. Now you might think that all that joy comes on our part, because Christ is coming to save us from our sins. But that's really only half the equation. Our text from Zephaniah for today actually tells us that as Christ's coming approaches, our God is every bit as joyful as we are. In these days of gift-giving, it's important for all of us to remember the Lord's teaching that it's more blessed to give than to receive, and here we can see that principle in action. This lesson and this week in the church year both are all about Advent Joy – the Lord's joy over us, and our joy in his salvation.

But part of what makes this section of Zephaniah so joyful is that the rest of the book very definitely was not. Zephaniah lived at the time of King Josiah of Judah, who was a good king himself – but who lived in an age of too little, too late. Though he tried to reform his kingdom, Judah's fate was already sealed that soon they would be taken into captivity in Babylon. Zephaniah was charged with telling the people that their land and their lives would be devastated because of their sin, and there was nothing they could do to stop the coming destruction.

But then he also got to share the message that the LORD – always faithful, always hopeful – wouldn't turn his back on his people. He promised to deliver them, to bring them home, and to restore them to their blessed

place as his children and his chosen people. But this wouldn't be any of their own doing. No, this was something that he promised freely to give, with Advent Joy that would not be denied: "*He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*"

See, as much as we have a tendency to try to pull our own weight with God, we just never possibly can. And the more we try, the more clearly we find that out. This is good news of great joy that our God delights in us, because that means our relationship with him isn't about us and it doesn't come down to our imperfection and inadequacies. It's all about him. His grace. His goodness. His salvation that he delivered to us in Jesus Christ, and that means we never have to doubt or worry or be afraid, because his delight will never fail us. That's why he created us in the first place, so he could have companions to love and enjoy eternity with. And even after we fell into sin, that purpose never changed – and neither did that delight. God didn't give up on us; he fought for us to win us back because he didn't want to have to spend eternity apart from us.

And how did he win us back? Well, in the words of the text, quietly. What our text actually says here is that he will be quiet in his love – and that can mean a few different things. First, it's the picture of being so overwhelmed with love and joy that you just don't know what to say. You're speechless. This is the joy of the woman who's just been asked to be someone's bride. This is the love of a man who's holding his newborn child for the first time. That same deep, profound, words-can't-describe-it kind of love is the love that your God has for you – and there's nothing better to rejoice in!

But the quietness of that love expressed itself not just in feelings of the heart. It expressed itself in heart-rending actions. Our Lord was quiet in his love when in still, silent night, he gave his One and Only Son to be one of us there in Bethlehem. Our Lord was quiet in his love when on the cross as he cried out, Christ Jesus was forsaken so that we would never have to be. And our Lord was quiet in his love when three days later in the early morning stillness, the first light of dawn revealed an empty tomb that meant heaven is open to us forever. See, because our Lord was quiet in his love, that means we can be quiet in his love, too. Because our Lord loves us and rejoices in us, that means no matter what comes, we can be still and know that he is God – we have reason to be quietly confident, content, and secure in him, because nothing can separate us from his love and nothing can contain the Advent joy he has in us.

And in fact, that joy means that he's not quiet anymore. No, he promises now that he's rejoicing over us with singing. As every human being generally knows, nothing quite tugs at our heart strings like a good love song. Well who could ever write a better love song than God himself, and what an amazing wonder that he wrote his love song about you and me! But it's true – our Lord Jesus doesn't call us his Bride for nothing. It's because his love for us, his delight in us is so great that nothing can possibly top it. Just as there was singing in heaven and on earth the night Jesus was born – “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men!” – so also our Savior-God is so overjoyed that he bursts out in song every time a sinner repents and every time he sees his people joyfully serving him. Our Lord sings because the goal of his work of redemption – the salvation of his people – has been reached. He rejoices because the purpose of creation – that mankind might live in his presence forever – has been realized. Yes, the heavens resound with Advent joy – and it's all because of your gracious God's love and delight in you.

So you see, that pink *Gaudete* candle we lit this week really does mean something special. But of course, God's joy is only half the fun of Advent, because God's joy leads always also to our joy. Hear again what the prophet tells us: “*Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!*” In four different ways there Zephaniah calls us to Advent joy. You can't miss how intense and over-the-top he is here, because you can't miss all the different reasons he gives us to rejoice!

The first thing he says is that we are the Daughter of Zion, the Daughter of Jerusalem. We aren't slaves to the devil anymore because of our sins; we are God's own true children now. Though Holy Baptism, we have all the blessings of being a part of the family of God. We are heirs of heaven, and every time we come to the Lord's Table together, we're assured that there's a spot reserved just for us at the Lamb's eternal wedding feast. Ours is a place not in the earthly city of Jerusalem, but in the holy city, the New Jerusalem, with God our heavenly Father forever. Just as God's Old Testament people could take this promise and know that one day they would come home again, so also we can take this promise with Advent joy and know that one day we'll be coming home, too – into the heavenly mansions that our Lord Jesus is preparing for us right now.

And we can have that certainty because “*The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.*” Here the Lord is pictured as our judge and our king – but not one who wants to throw the book at us. He's one who has vindicated us and fought off every enemy that would try to harm us. Our Judge and King is our Savior Jesus Christ who took away all our punishments by suffering them in our place. He nullified all our convictions by paying the price for our sins with his own holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death. And he has swept away all our enemies, everything that opposes us, and anyone who would try to keep us from him and all he's prepared for us like a mom on a rampage to clean the house before Christmas company comes. So if God is for us, who could ever be against us? Never again will we fear any harm, because there is no room in our hearts for anything but Advent joy that fills us up with godly hope and confidence until they overflow.

So finally Zephaniah says to God's people of all times and places, “*Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save.*” We have no reason to be afraid or terrified or discouraged in this world – no matter how much the deck might seem stacked against us at times – because always at our back is the Mighty Warrior, our mighty hero and champion, Jesus Christ, who has already defeated everything all the evil forces of earth and hell could ever throw at him. Yes, God is with us because Immanuel came on Christmas to be one with us, and that means no army, no devil or demon, no sickness or tragedy or anything else can ever separate us from his love. So people of God, celebrate his eternal victory with Advent joy. Through faith in Jesus Christ, you have been freed from fear, renewed for action, and saved to serve. So let him empower your hands – not to hang limp, but for prayer and praise and service, because Advent joy like ours just can't help but be shared.

You know, it can be hard to tell sometimes whose joy is greater at Christmastime: parents or kids, the gift-getter or the gift-giver. It's hard to say, but one thing's for sure: either way, it's beautiful to see both of them so fulfilled by each other. And that's the case with Advent joy, too. Whose is greater: ours or God's? The truth is it doesn't really matter, because in our joy our God rejoices, and that just makes our joy that much more joyful. So this Advent season, *Gaudete* – rejoice, because it was Jesus' greatest joy to bring us the joy of his salvation. Amen.