

ADVENT THREE
December 13, 2015
Zephaniah 3:14-20
God's victory Dance
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The Old Testament prophet, Zephaniah was driven nearly to despair over the sinful conditions among the people of God. He predicted the coming of God in judgment.

Zephaniah, like John the Baptist, and, indeed, like God himself, TAKES SIN VERY SERIOUSLY.

Zephaniah and John knew that the only thing sinners really deserve is judgment and destruction. And so Zephaniah paints a frightening picture in the first part of his book. Listen to these words, "*I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord.*"

In the prophet's understanding, **God has no option but to destroy all of creation!**

This is THE BIND GOD IS IN when God looks at sinful people.

God demands holiness and righteousness. But we fall far short of what God demands of us. Not only that, we **usually do it in an arrogant way**, as if we think we can get along just fine without God, or as if, "*We're not really so bad.*"

God is in a bind, because God's justice demands our destruction. It's a dark and hopeless situation. But into this darkness comes **an astonishing burst of sunlight – a ray of hope.**

Listen again to what Zephaniah says in today's passage from chapter 3: "*The Lord has taken away the judgments against you...The Lord, your God... gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness....*"

How can we explain the sudden shift in Zephaniah's message? What has turned the darkness into day? Have we **done something to deserve rescuing?**

According to the Biblical witness, and our own experience, **that's not it at all.** This sudden change – this astonishing word of joy and rescue – is **purely the result of God's lovingkindness. It's astounding BECAUSE it's SO TOTALLY UNDESERVED.**

GOD'S MERCY TRUMPS GOD'S JUSTICE.

God decides to send his Son as savior, to suffer in place of us. So the death and destruction **we deserve** will be **borne by Jesus Christ**, instead.

And because he's so certain, Zephaniah speaks as if this has already happened.

God is a warrior who has won a victory. **And now, it's time to rejoice and sing.** NOW IT'S TIME TO PARTY!

That's what Zephaniah says, *The Lord, your God...will rejoice over you with gladness, he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*"

God almost seems happier than we are at the news that we will be forgiven and spared destruction.

It's natural to ask, "*Why does God feel so much joy over our salvation?*" Could it be because **when we are estranged from God, GOD FEELS EVEN MORE PAIN THAN WE DO?**

God loves us. God has created us to have fellowship with him.

How it must GRIEVE HIS HEART when we turn our backs on him.

How he must ACHE to think that any of His children might face eternal destruction.

God would rather die than lose even one of us!

And so, as our text tells us, when God considers the rescue that has been effected through Jesus Christ, HE CAN'T HELP IT: He **bursts into joyous singing**. He exults over us!

Can you imagine God singing because your sins are forgiven? Can you picture God shouting for joy because through Jesus' death he has saved you? Yes, you!

Even if NOBODY ELSE HAS EVER EXPRESSED JOY OVER YOU, God does.

... What a thought!

Now, if you can handle the picture of God singing for joy, HOW ABOUT THINKING OF GOD DANCING!?

That's what it means when it says "*he will exult over you as on a day of festival.*"

When we lived in Japan, I was able to observe many religious festivals, both Buddhist and Shinto, and **on festival days, everyone goes just a little bit crazy** with celebrating. And there's always **lots of dancing and singing and shouting for joy**.

It's that kind of mood that Zephaniah is talking about. **GOD IS SINGING AND DOING A VICTORY DANCE!**

God dances for joy. To put it in modern perspective, I think God's dance might be like the joyful dance of the contestant who's just won a car on "The Price is Right," or **the victory dance we see when the puck goes in the net** or when a **wide receiver** (preferably not one wearing green and gold) **scores a touchdown**

Who knows, God might not even be above doing a bit of **taunting in the devil's face**, because **God has beaten the devil**. And who's gonna throw a penalty flag if God does taunt the devil?

So how are we to respond to this passage?

First, don't ignore the first part of Zephaniah's message: We are sinners who deserve eternal punishment. And WITHOUT A SAVIOR, WE'RE DOOMED.

The reality of sin is a very strong theme during the season of Advent. WE TRULY DO LIVE IN DARKNESS. Some of that darkness is beyond our control, but **much of the darkness is a result of our own selfish, sinful natures.**

But through this prophet, God's word breaks **like a sudden beam of bright sunshine**, scattering the darkness.

As we hear in v. 15, *"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you...you shall fear disaster no more."*

And there's still more: *"God will renew you in His love,"* it says. Because of the saving work of this Jesus, we are indeed "renewed in God's love". In Christ we're renewed daily, as we **struggle against the power that sin still holds in our lives.**

But perhaps the strongest message in this text is one of joy -- PURE, UNLIMITED JOY.

Zephaniah has given us the astounding image of A GOD WHO SINGS AND DANCES FOR JOY over you and me – a God who does a **victory dance.**

DO YOU GET THE PICTURE?

Of course, **God's joy is not a shallow joy** that **ignores the seriousness of sin** and the darkness that still persists in our world. But **it's a joy that says, in spite of all of that, it's a wonderful world**, and it's great when people can be reconciled to God.

CAN THAT JOY BE OURS, TOO?

GOD INVITES US TO JOIN HIM IN HIS VICTORY DANCE.

It's like the way a wide receiver will often run over to the stands and leap into the arms of the fans when he scores. He's trying to share the victory dance.

Because VICTORY DANCING IS BEST WHEN IT'S SHARED WITH OTHERS.

In the same way, GOD WANTS US TO SHARE IN THE VICTORY DANCE, celebrating God's defeat of the forces of sin, death and the devil.

God urges us, **in the midst of our dark world**, to rejoice with God and BREAK OUT INTO SINGING.

God invites us to welcome the ray of sunshine which came to earth at Christmas, and **sing and dance for joy**, as we recall **the marvelous victory this baby of Bethlehem has won for us.**

The Lord of the dance is singing and dancing for joy today. Shall we join in?

And for those who don't think you can dance; well, we can all at least tap our toes, can't we? We can **dance in our hearts.**

And, here's the thing: **if our hearts are filled with singing and dancing**, then we'll find it easy to share God's joy with others.

And if that happens, PRETTY SOON THE WHOLE WORLD WILL BE TAKING PART IN GOD'S VICTORY DANCE.

In closing, I share some of the lyrics to the song, *Lord of the dance*, by Sydney Carter:

*I danced in the morning when the world was young
I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun
I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth*

*I danced on a Friday when the world turned black
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back
They buried my body, they thought I was gone
But I am the dance, and the dance goes on*

*They cut me down and I leapt up high
I am the life that will never, never die
I'll live in you if you'll live in me
I am the Lord of the dance, said he*

*Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he.*