

Third Sunday in Advent – December 15th, 2024
REBELLION AND REDEMPTION

Prayer

Jesus, help us to recognize and repent of all the ways in which we rebel against your law, and help us understand and give thanks for your death that paid for our redemption. AMEN

Context

How many of you know anything about the author of today's Old Testament text? Just so you have some background, Zephaniah was a Hebrew prophet, a descendent of King Hezekiah who proclaimed both divine judgment and divine forgiveness. The first verse of the Book of Zephaniah marks him a contemporary of Josiah, king of Judah, who reigned in Jerusalem from 640 to 609 BC. This book that bears his name was most likely written in the last 10 years of that reign, about 620 BC.

Rebellion

Prior to Josiah, Judah had been ruled by Manasseh and Amon. Here are some of the evil things they did (2 Kings 21:16)

Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

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And (2 Chron 33:1-23 selections)

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Asheroth, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. . . . And he burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger [Amon] did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done. Amon sacrificed to all the images that Manasseh his father had made and served them. . . . Amon incurred guilt more and more.

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God's hand of judgment had been upon Judah for all the evil that they had done, and in today's text, Zephaniah is telling of the coming restoration and redemption.

So, what did that judgement look like?

The people were fearful – verses 15, 16, and 17 all speak to the fears of the people. Fear is a typical reaction to the preaching of the law – fearful of disaster, both divine and man-made. They were also despondent (v 16), oppressed by enemies, weak, helpless (v 19), and scattered (v 20). Again, these are common reactions when we have been chastised by the law and feel the wrath of God's judgment.

Finally, there were also the misfortunate (v 20), those whose good fortune had been turned aside and replaced by bad.

The people had rebelled against God – this wasn't a sin of omission, but they knew what they should have done and did something to the contrary despite that knowledge.

Unlike God, I'm not omniscient, so I don't know the ways in which each of you have rebelled against God, only the ways in which I've done so.

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However, I do know that since our wills are bound to sin, that you too have rebelled in ways both great and small. And just like the people of Judah during Zephaniah's time, you may feel worried, fearful, despondent, weak, and/or helpless.

Redemption

The redemption of Judah, not unlike their rebellion, began with their leaders. We read about Amon's son, Josiah in the book of Chronicles (2 Chron 34:1-3):

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy [of sixteen], he began to seek the God of David his father, and in the twelfth year [at age 20] he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images.

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So it was that Zephaniah was able to proclaim God's forgiveness of the sins of Judah and announce their restoration and redemption. We see how the King led the people to seek God and then to repent, to turn away, from their evil actions.

We hear the **joy** and **encouragement** in the words of the prophet – to shout, sing, rejoice, be glad, and cheer up (v 14, 16, and 17)!

We hear the **exhortations** to not be afraid and to be calm. (v 16 and 17)

We hear the **promises** of having God's attention, of His judgment upon those who opposed Judah (v 19), of salvation for the weak and helpless (v 19), of the gathering together of His people, and of the restoration of good fortunes (v 20).

How is this possible? Because their savior, the King of Kings, was living among them (v 15 and 17), just as He is living in all of those who have been baptized! Speaking through the prophet, our Lord made these promises (v 20) – and we know that the Lord is indeed faithful and keeps His promises.

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We have proclaimed that we are poor, miserable sinners and have confessed all our sins and iniquities to God, from whom we only deserve temporal and eternal punishment. But in His great mercy, and through the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Jesus, the babe whose birth we are anticipating during this season, God himself repents us of our sins and no longer holds them against us.

God has called us together as His people in this place and, because of the spirit that we share, we have true fellowship and brotherhood with the fellow members of our spiritual family.

Because we have been adopted as God's children, and because Christ rose from the dead, we no longer need fear death and we can have confidence in an eternal life with Christ.

To reiterate what I said last week: I urge you, therefore, to have open ears and a loosened tongue during the Advent season, when we are waiting to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, the incarnate creator of the universe, to be aware of opportunities to share about Jesus, to share this good news of restoration and redemption and to join Him on His Mission.

AMEN