

“The Rejoicing of God”
October 2, 2022

Zephaniah 3:11-20

As we read through the Minor Prophets, we come this morning to Zephaniah, whose ministry took place from about 640 to 600 BC. Zephaniah was the first prophet to speak since the time of Isaiah, about sixty years earlier.

And compared to the words of some of the other prophets that we have heard in recent weeks, Zephaniah sounds a refreshing note of hope: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart....God has turned away your enemies...you shall fear disaster no more.”

I like that.

There are times when I need to hear words like these, times when I need to be reminded and encouraged to rejoice—especially in these days.

Maybe you need such reminders and such encouragement as well.

Of course, not all of this book is so hope-filled.

It begins with God threatening to “utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth.”

It is filled with warnings about the coming Day of the Lord—a day of distress and anguish, not just for the people of the Kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem, but also for the nations that are their enemies.

We know that such a Day did arrive—not many years after Zephaniah raised his voice in warning. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The people were taken off into exile in Babylon.

In exile, however, the people did not remember only the dire warnings of Zephaniah. They also remembered God’s promise through him of a remnant—that small number of people who would return to Jerusalem, who would “pasture and lie down, and no one would make them afraid.”

In exile there was always the hope of return, of going back to Judah, back to the city.

In exile there was always the hope of going “back to normal.”

And, of course, we know what happened.

The exile did come to an end. The people did return.

God is faithful.

God is working God’s purpose out.

God provides a way out of no way.

In the most difficult of times, in times of deep shadows and despair, let us always remember this: God is faithful.

God provides a way out of no way.

The people returned. Not everyone, of course. Some had died. Some stayed behind.

And when the people returned, what did they find?

Well, we heard about that last year when we read through Ezra and Nehemiah. You remember! They found the aftermath of destruction. They found the protective walls broken down. They found a city in ruins. They found their place of worship in disarray.

This is to say, they returned—but they didn't return to "normal." They didn't return to the way things used to be.

So, what they did was more important than what they found.

What did they do? They got to work.

They rebuilt the walls of the city, they restored their place of worship and renewed their way of worship. They remade their community, their city, their nation.

They turned their sights to the future.

Zephaniah, who knew God's ways are not our ways, who knew both the judgment and the mercy of God, could imagine that distant time of return as a time of rejoicing: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart."

Why would the people not rejoice in such goodness?

And not only the people! Above all, it is God who rejoices.

Did you hear that?

The Lord, our God, is in your midst...
 God will rejoice over you with gladness,
 God will renew you with God's love,
 God will exult over you with loud
 singing as on a day of festival.

What a beautiful vision: God there in the midst of the people, rejoicing with them, delighting in their work, exulting in their commitment.

The living, rejoicing God making the renewal of all things possible, accompanying the people into a future of hope.

For two and a half years we have been dealing with this pandemic. It's not over. We're not back to "normal"—whatever that was. And remember the song that tells us: "The trouble with normal is it always gets worse."

As individuals and as a congregation we keep reassessing the situation. We've become used to doing that, haven't we? Looking at the constantly changing world around us, making new risk calculations.

Over the past year we've done some slow and deliberate returning ourselves. We have come back to in person worship. Our programs of Christian education for all ages have resumed. This

past week our Church Council met in person around the fireplace in Rockwood Hall for the first time since February of 2020. And we rejoiced!

We have returned.

And here's the thing:

My friends in this place—and my friends in cyberspace—we have work to do.

No, it's not that the walls of this beloved building need to be repaired. We have kept this building in good shape over all these months.

The work God calls all of us to in these days is the renewing and rebuilding of our community, our congregation.

Here in this place, we look around and some are concerned about what they see—or to be more specific, what they don't see. They don't see the people in the numbers we were used to back in February of 2020. When I talk with visitors, I want to tell them, somewhat apologetically, “You know, we're actually a larger congregation than we appear to be on Sunday morning. We used to have a lot more people here in person. We're not a congregation in decline. We're a congregation in a pandemic.”

Not that this is unique to us. It's the condition of the other churches in Iowa City; it's the condition of the UCC churches in Iowa; it's the condition of churches across the country. A report last spring found that about 67% of people in mainline Protestant churches had returned to in-person worship by last fall—and then that number simply plateaued.

We've worked to keep in touch with people, but we are missing some. Now is the time to reach out to someone you haven't seen, someone you've missed. Now is the time as well to actively welcome others—the new members who will be joining later this month, the visitors whom we don't know, remembering that each one of us was a stranger here at some time.

As Chuck said this morning, we are becoming what some have called a “hybrid” church and what others could call a “more inclusive” church. We are continuing to work to make certain that everyone, regardless of whether they attend worship here on Sunday morning or not, are included in the fullest extent of our church life as possible.

The work that God calls us to will not be finished this month or by the end of this year—or even a year from now. After the flood in 2008, recovery experts told us that it takes about eight years for a community to recover from a flood. If you think about it, that was a pretty good estimate. Hancher, for example, was destroyed by the flood and the new Hancher opened eight years later, in 2016. The Art Museum took even longer to reopen.

Our new reality has been two and a half years in the making. Renewing and rebuilding is our long-term project. It will require courage and vision, it will require faith, hope, and love. The good news is that by God's grace, we have all of those qualities.

We have work to do.

We also have giving to do.

We're calling this "Giving for a New Beginning"—because that's where we are. Starting once more. Moving forward. You'll be hearing more about this in the coming weeks, so I'll be brief. Inflation and recession loom. But this is not the first time in the history of our congregation that inflation and recession have whispered in our hearts: "Hold back." Always we have been a generous people. Always.

We have giving to do.

And, especially, we have rejoicing to do.

Those words of Zephaniah to the small remnant in Jerusalem speak to us, don't they? "Cry out for joy, rejoice with all your heart. Fear not, do not let your hands hang limp."

Let us set aside all the gloom and dull apprehension that can fill our hearts. Let us choose instead to be glad and to rejoice together. With music that lifts our spirits, with the care and love we show one another, with our always growing commitment to the well-being of the people of this city we should cry out for joy each day.

And let us recognize that, as the prophet says, God rejoices with us. God rejoices with us when we feel there are too few people in the sanctuary. God rejoices with us when there could be more children in the church school. God rejoices with us when the nominating committee worriedly searches for leaders. God rejoices when our leaders prayerfully and thoughtfully chart our course for the years ahead and lose sleep at night.

God rejoices because in all of this we are being faithful to the One who has called us to this place and who sustains us in our commitments.

And we rejoice anew when God speaks to us in our days through the ancient words of Zephaniah, telling us "I will restore your fortune before your eyes."

Let us, then, open up our eyes, let us rejoice and give and work together.

We have been brought this far by faith and by God's grace.

And God has not brought us this far to abandon us.

God has brought us this far that we might continue to be God's people in this place, a light on this corner shining into all the shadow places of our community, bringing hope even in these difficult days.

God has brought us this far that we might work and give and rejoice knowing that God rejoices over us and is glad.