

SOMETHING TO BE THANKFUL FOR

ZEPHANIAH 3:17

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

Zephaniah 3:17a (NIV)

“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save.”

Zephania 3:17b (NIV)

**“He will take great delight in you,
He will quiet you with his love,
He will rejoice over you with singing.”**

I really enjoy these joint services for two reasons. It gives us a sense of the history of our church when we celebrate with the Japanese congregation. We are reminded that this multiethnic church that we are today, comes from the direct vision of a group of Japanese immigrants who started this church 55 years ago.

Secondly, we continue to have two ongoing ministries at our church with one mission, to reach people for Jesus Christ. So this morning we can celebrate God's work together.

For most people, Thanksgiving is a time to celebrate around the dinner table. It is one of those holidays in which families prepare their best meals. Unfortunately, we have more than a few of our women at church who, we will say, are a "little cooking challenged?" I'm not going to mention her by name, but this story will readily identify her. One Thanksgiving, she wanted to turn over a new leaf and decided that she would prepare a Thanksgiving dinner for her family and even though she could not cook at all, she was determined. She went out and bought a 20-pound Turkey and was getting ready to cook it, when she realized that she didn't have a clue how long she should cook it, after all, she was used to cooking things in the microwave.

On the Turkey wrapper, they had an 800 hotline to call for cooking help so she called immediately.

The counselor said, "Can I help you?"

She said, "I'd like to know how long it takes to cook a 20-pound turkey."

The counselor was running his finger over the chart and said, "Just a minute Miss."

"Thank you very much," said our girl, and hung up the phone!

Sometimes I think we are not happy in life because we focus on all the negative things, and forget all the positive things. People who are happy in life seem to be people who are thankful. This morning, I want us to think about something that should make us extremely thankful, ... and if we believe it, it should change the way we live forever.

Please do this short exercise with me. I am going to give you one minute. Close your eyes, and try to picture God as you pray to Him. What does He look like? What is He doing?

Zephaniah 3:17a (NIV)

“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save.”

Every time I do this exercise, I almost always draw a blank, and maybe for good reason. After all, God is spirit and even if I could picture Him as a physical being, He is bigger and brighter than anything I could ever imagine. I'm really thankful that God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus. At least in Jesus, I can get an idea of some of God's characteristics. Jesus reminds me that God is personal and intimate.

The prophet Zephaniah says, "The LORD your God has arrived to live among you." How much time do we spend thinking about this truth? The God of the entire universe chooses to live among us. Jesus demonstrated how personal and intimate God is. Jesus took on our human existence to come down and live with us, for the specific purpose of repairing the broken relationship we had with God because of our sin. Please do not miss the heart of God. God personally led the Israelites by the pillar of cloud by day and by the pillar of fire at night. God

lived among the Hebrews as He sat enthroned above the Ark of the Covenant. God came down in the form of Jesus to live among His people and today, God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives as we confess Jesus as Lord. I would say that being in a personal, passionate, and intimate relationship with God is a lot to be thankful for.

Secondly, Jesus demonstrates that the God we worship is all-powerful and can deliver us from all evil. There was nothing we could do to make ourselves right with God because of our sin it was our destiny to be separated from God for all eternity. But, Jesus broke the bonds of sin by dying on the cross and rising from the dead.

Since God created the universe, there is nothing that He cannot do. God solved our major problem in life, as we were headed for eternal hell, our mighty Savior saved us, and gave us eternal life. Let me pause here for a moment. I want you to think about the biggest problem in your life right now. Think about how big it is. ... Now think about being an enemy of God. Imagine that you are going to spend an eternity in hell, a place where you will experience torture, loneliness, and suffering with no hope for all eternity. How big is the problem you are facing compared to that? If God can rescue you from an eternity in hell and give you eternal life, then how big is that problem when compared to the power of God to save? Many of us have to face betrayal, loneliness, illness, suffering, and old age. But God has promised through Jesus that He will see us through it all and He is big enough to be all that we need.

Not only is God a personal, passionate and intimate God, not only is He a powerful God, we can see by the life of Jesus that He is a loving and gracious God. Jesus said that He came to give us life, ... to give us a full and abundant life. The prophet says here that God, with His love will calm all our fears. Sometimes I think we miss the tenderness of God. There were several outcast women that Jesus healed and restored to the community. If you read through the Gospels, you can see that

Jesus has an extremely tender side to Him concerning those who were badly treated. Fear has all its roots in not trusting in the love and grace of God. Jesus said that if we are honest and humble enough to confess our sins, He is loving and trustworthy enough to forgive all of those sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness. When we live in fear, we are not trusting God to be good to His word.

I think these characteristics summarize what God does for us in salvation and in bringing us to eternal life. It was out of love that God created us and His desire was that we should be in an intimate relationship built on love and trust. Unfortunately, we were born into sin and because of our own personal rebellion against God, that relationship was broken. No matter how hard we try or how good we become, it will never be good enough to make up for our sins. God is perfectly holy and He cannot allow anyone or anything into a relationship with Himself that is also not absolutely perfect and holy.

But because of love, God made a powerful way. God took on human flesh, came down to earth and lived as one of us. It is Jesus God the Son, Who makes a way possible for us to be reconciled with God. Jesus suffered and died in our place, the punishment we were supposed to experience for our sin, but it was given to Jesus to suffer. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice He died because He loves us. When we place our faith in Jesus and His finished work on the cross in our behalf, our sins are forgiven, our relationship with God is restored, and we receive eternal life. At this point, God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in each of us. Even though we continue to sin, God the Holy Spirit stays with us because of His love for us.

We talk about these aspects of God quite often, He is personal and intimate, He is all-powerful and He is loving and gracious. If you have received Jesus this way, then you are a

believer, you have eternal life and you have the Holy Spirit living in you. We have a great deal for which to be thankful. Anything we get in this life, after receiving eternal life, is merely an add-on.

So when I read this in Zephaniah, I accepted that pretty easily. But then these two sentences caught my eye.

Zephania 3:17b (NIV)

“He will take great delight in you,

He will quiet you with his love,

He will rejoice over you with singing.”

The prophet said that God rejoices over us with great gladness and God exults over us by singing a “happy song”. That's a side of God I have difficulty getting into my head, but let me try to paint this picture for you: Those of us who are parents can certainly remember cradling our children in our arms, rocking them and singing to them. We placed our children on our chests and let them fall asleep to the sound of our heart, the heart that beats for them. How many of us can remember being children and having our parents cuddle us and wrap their arms around us? That is the picture here. God wraps His arms around us, cuddles us, and sings to us. Can you imagine that in any way?

Further, He rejoices over us with great gladness. I remember playing sports and having my family and friends cheering for me. I also remember cheering for my children as they accomplished milestones in their lives. It is fun to cheer for your children. Did you ever stop to think about these two thoughts, that God cheers for you and that He sings happy songs about you? I strongly feel that if we really believed this, it would change the way we lived our lives.

Let me give you a few examples. Jesus stood up and cheered for the widow who threw her last two cents in for the church offering. Jesus tenderly restored a woman who was publicly

humiliated and charged with adultery. Jesus cuddled the little children and told the adults that they must become more like children. Jesus said that all of heaven throws a party when an unbeliever comes to salvation or a wayward Christian repents and comes back to Him. God cheers when we care for one another. He sings when we feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick and poor, and minister to the down and out. Jesus said that He is waiting for us.

If we felt that loved by God, wouldn't that change the way we live? Wouldn't any problem we face in life seem small? Wouldn't we continually be thankful that God of the universe loved us beyond our wildest desires for any kind of human love? Wouldn't we continually be thankful?

Listen to the story of a woman who was continually thankful.

"Fulton Oursler learned the lesson of a grateful heart from an African-American woman who helped care for him when he was a little boy. Every time she sat down to eat, she would bow her head and say, 'Much obliged, Lord.' Oursler asked her why she did this, because the food was there for her to enjoy whether she gave thanks or not. She replied, 'Sure we get our food, but it makes everything taste better to be grateful.

Looking for good things is a kind of game an old preacher taught me to play. Take this morning when I woke up and thought, 'What's there to praise God for today?' You know what? I couldn't think of a thing! Then from the kitchen came the most delicious odor that ever tickled my nose. Coffee! 'Much obliged, Lord, for the coffee,' I said, 'and much obliged, too, for the smell of it.'

Many years later, Oursler stood at the bedside of that woman as she lay dying. Seeing her in much pain, he wondered if she could still find something to be grateful for. Just then she opened her eyes and as she saw him and the others gathered round, she folded her hands and said with a smile, 'Much obliged, Lord, for such fine friends.'" (Kent Hughes)

I'm hoping that knowing God through the life of Jesus and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit loves you in such an intimate way that He rejoices over you and sings happy songs because of you. And, I'm hoping that no matter what problems we face in this world, we can always say to God, "Much obliged Lord, for loving me."