

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“God is Near”

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

¹⁵ *The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.*

*The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.*

¹⁶ *On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:*

*Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.*

¹⁷ *The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;*

*he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;*

*he will exult over you with loud singing
¹⁸ as on a day of festival.*

*I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.*

¹⁹ *I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.*

*And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

²⁰ *At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.*

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Back when newspapers used to get delivered to your home every day, I loved to glance at the cartoon *The Far Side*. I remember one panel in particular where a man was shown

driving his car down the road. In the passenger side mirror of the car was a huge and hideous face of a monster or gargoyle. The face was enough to scare anyone. But what made that cartoon especially funny was the caption which repeated the now-familiar warning: "Objects in mirror are much closer than they appear."

In a *Christian Century* article, Herbert O'Driscoll writes of a delightful memory that his uncle shared. The uncle was about to be discharged from the Royal British Navy as World War II was ending. One evening he decided to attend a play in London, the opening of a brand new show, an American musical. He had lived through the war and was now in a mood to celebrate. As he entered the theatre, the first thing he noticed was the lights. For over six years he had gotten used to muted lighting conditions, working in the darkness. Now in this warm and festive place, the bright lights suddenly brought life again. Then as the curtain went up and the actors and dancers leaped onto the stage, he was transformed by the music:

O what a beautiful morning!
O what a beautiful day!
I've got a wonderful feeling
Everything's going my way.

O'Driscoll writes that his uncle experienced the play *Oklahoma* fresh from America, now bursting into the dark world of Europe with "a sudden blaze of sunshine, space, energy, hope, and possibility." The play came from a land not exhausted by war, a land still strong. The play sang a song of the future. It sang a song of promise that was suddenly near, nearer that it appeared before he entered the theatre that night.

This is the third Sunday in Advent. Today we light the candle of joy. Historically, this Sunday has been kind of a break in the season of Advent. That is why we light a pink candle instead of a purple one. We emphasize the joy and celebration that is about to be ours in the gift of the Christ Child. Our urgency and expectation heightens as we perceive that God is near.

The words of the Scripture lessons reinforce this idea. Zephaniah is normally referred to as the gloomiest of all prophets but there is an extra zing in his words we read today. He is now an optimist. Zephaniah sings a song of thanksgiving, calling us to "Rejoice! Exult! Sing aloud! Shout! The Lord has taken away your punishment and turned back your enemies. The Lord will give you honor and praise among all the people of the earth." Zephaniah looks to a day that can best be described with rejoicing, exultation, and the reversal of human fortunes. His vision includes the promise of God's presence. God is near.

We also hear from the apostle Paul on this third Sunday of Advent. Paul is usually a very intense and solemn individual. But as he addresses the church at Philippi he writes these famous words, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice! The Lord is near." Paul also seems to be in an exceptional mood. He is bubbling over with joy. He is living with the understanding that the presence of God is close at hand. These are the kind of words that we are used to singing at Christmas.

The Lord is near! We know that many in Paul's community expected Christ's second coming immediately. This thought shaped much of their hope and their faith. Whether Paul was writing from the exuberance of a belief in the second coming is debated by scholars. But we are positive that he was writing with the confidence that the actual presence of God was near in some way, shape, or form. The people of God were on the verge of something very big. The Lord was at hand. Things were about to change.

Paul encourages everyone to replace anxiety and worry with prayer and thanksgiving. Rather than letting the darkness of the world and the fear of the future eat away at your spirit, Paul endorses making these things known to God. The problems will not disappear. The uncertainty of the world will not suddenly turn into complete security and comfort. But human fear and worry will be transformed by the peace of God which passes human understanding, a

peace that will guard our hearts and minds into proper and useful thought and action. Karl Barth writes that the joy Paul describes does not deny the difficult situation but delivers a defiant “nevertheless.” He believed that joy actually takes root in darkness. For Paul, the constant reality of life is that God is near, the Lord is at hand. God is next door. God is in your next breath. God is with the next person you meet. This is the ultimate ground of human hope.

Joann Adams writes of her southern grandmother, whose words contained phrases that didn't always make sense to those outside the family. She remembered taking car trips with grandmother and like any child, growing impatient with the long distance that needed to be traveled. She would complain to the adults, “How much longer will it be?” Her grandmother would respond, “We will get there directly.” With this Adams said she was always reassured that they were indeed not far from the promised destination.

God is near. Such a reality doesn't eliminate anxiety about the world situation. Given the state of our world and our lives we might think there is no way we can be filled with joy this Christmas. How can one celebrate when there is so much to trouble our hearts and minds? Yet apparently these lessons teach us that worry and trouble are always part of any human being who has to live in the world, make decisions, and seek direction in work, play and in understanding life's purpose. The prophet Zephaniah was writing at a time in which the city of Jerusalem was surrounded and threatened by enemies. Paul wrote his letter of joy to the Philippians from a jail cell, concerned about his separation from friends, worried about his possible execution. These words of joy expressing the nearness of God were written in spite of the conditions of their times. In fact it was because of their troubles and their worries that they believed God was ready to act. They could have sung sad songs about being abandoned and God being distant. But they did not. God was near. Like the southern grandmother they must have believed that God “was going to get there directly.”

Madeline L'Engle wrote, “God did not wait until the world was ready, till the nations were all at peace. God came when the heavens were unsteady and the prisoners cried out for release. God did not wait for the perfect time. God came when the need was deep and great. In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt. To a world like ours of anguished shame, God came and God's light would not go out. We cannot wait until the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice.”

Arthur Caliendo tells a story of a little girl whose mother had just brought home a baby brother from the hospital. When the baby came home, the little girl was all excited. She asked her parents if she could spend some time alone with her new sibling. She asked, she begged, and she pleaded, “Would you please let me spend some time alone with my baby brother?” Her parents were a little suspicious, even fearful, thinking that some kind of sibling rivalry had developed and that the girl might even hurt the baby. But finally they gave in to her. The little girl went into her brother's nursery and closed the door to just a crack, a crack that her parents could peek through and still hear. The little girl leaned over her brother's crib and whispered, “Tell me what it's like to feel God. I am beginning to forget.”

Perhaps that is why this season contains such hope for us. Through most of our days we tend to forget what it is like to feel God near us. We allow ourselves to be consumed with the threats, the worries, the darkness and the shadows. Today we find hope in the promise of Advent. There is a lot of energy and possibility in that hope. God is near. God is closer than we think. God is approachable. God is faithful. God can be trusted. God is about to act. We are the people of God. Today we celebrate the promise of God with great joy.