

SHAME INTO PRAISE  
Zephaniah 3:14-20  
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First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana  
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God's love—is it within our capacity to understand such love? Love that never gives up, that always offers restoration? Love that calls us “beloved” in spite of everything we do, or fail to do?

Jesus shows us pictures of this love, with both his own actions and his parables. The parable I have been thinking about this week as a conversation partner with Zephaniah's prophecy is the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). You know the story. The son has gone off and squandered his inheritance in immoral and extravagant living. Penniless and desperate, he returns home, intending to seek work as a hired hand on his father's estate. He admits has sinned against heaven and before his father; he says is no longer worthy to be called son. But before the son has uttered a single word, the father runs to embrace him and welcome him home. And soon a great celebration is set in motion. Such is the father's immense love. Such is God's love.

Our Zephaniah passage is directed to a people: to daughter Zion, daughter Jerusalem, the beloved who is one's own child, the daughter who has lost her way, the prodigal daughter, if you will. This rebellious daughter is promised restoration.

There is no question the people of Israel have done wrong and are suffering for it. Chapter 3 opens with Jerusalem being addressed as “soiled, defiled, oppressing city.” “[Jerusalem] “has not trusted in the Lord, it has not drawn near to its God” (v. 2).

But Zephaniah looks ahead to the day of the Lord, the day when God makes all things new. God's people are invited to live into this vision of shalom.

In this day, fortunes are reversed. The haughty and proud are removed from the center of power and the humble and lowly are rewarded with pasture and security (vv. 12-13).

In this day, salvation comes to the people. Verse 15: “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.” Moreover, the lame and the outcast are given new life (v. 19).

In this day, God comes near and dwells in the midst of the people. There is no longer any fear of disaster (v. 15 & v. 18).

In this day, the people come home (v. 20). They are gathered together from distant places. And divisions among them are bridged. Indeed, the Tower of Babel is reversed and all speak the same tongue: “At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord” (3:9).

In this day, there is great rejoicing and celebrating, like on a day of festival (v. 17). God exults over his beloved people. Like the prodigal's father, God expresses great joy at the restoring of his family.

The story of the prodigal daughter, the story of the prodigal son—these are *our* stories, the story of God’s people—all God’s people—restored to the persons God created us to be.

The story of the prodigal daughter, the story of the prodigal son—these are stories of *God’s love*, the amazing, transformative love that sends Jesus to dwell among us and teach us the way of peace.

Zephaniah’s prophecy ends with the words “I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord” (v. 20b).

With his healing of the lame and inclusion of the outcast, Jesus shows *before our eyes* the restoration of the wholeness that is shalom.

Jesus comes to reverse fortunes, to bring salvation, to be Emmanuel (God with us). Again and again, Jesus tells us not to fear, but to trust in God.

This Advent, we read Zephaniah alongside more familiar Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah (Advent 1) and Micah (Advent 4) and alongside the beautiful prophetic songs in Luke 1: Zechariah’s song known as the Benedictus (Advent 2) and Mary’s song, the Magnificat (Advent 4). The common themes are many; however, the phrase that stood out in my study of Zephaniah appears in verse 19: “I will change their shame into praise.”

The people are weighed down with shame. In biblical times, personal circumstances such as a disability, being barren, and separation from one’s family brought great shame. We saw this with Elizabeth and her infertility last Sunday. For Israel as a people, there is shame in having been conquered and sent into exile.

Shame did not die out when we entered the so-called modern era.

Take some everyday examples: When we’re behind on our homework, or struggling with calculus, why don’t we run to the teacher’s office to get help? If we’ve skipped class once or twice, or been absent from church for a while, why is it hard to go back? If we’ve let a friend down, why do we cross the street to avoid an encounter?

Deep in our beings is the recognition that we are not perfect, that we have fallen short, that we have sinned and done things to hurt others and ourselves--things that we may not want to admit even to ourselves. Instead of reveling in the blessing of being loved, we feel unworthy. We are tempted to hide, to put even greater distance between ourselves and God.

But God already knows it all. Nothing is hidden from God. And God loves us anyway. We are God’s beloved in spite of everything. As hard as it is for us to believe, God loves us and never stops loving.

God wants to take our shame and transform it into praise. As soon as we take a step toward our true home with God, God runs to meet us. God welcomes us home and rejoices over us.

When God breaks into the world to save us, God extends a strong hand in love. God invites us to dance. God wants us to participate in the praise party.

Shall we get up and dance? Shall we break out singing? Shall we stretch out our arms to reciprocate God's embrace?

Take a quick look at your hands. Are they clenched or relaxed? Buried in your pockets? Or loose and open to connection, ready to respond to a friendly hand that's offered you and equally ready to reach out and greet, console, or aid another?

How you are holding your hands at this particular moment isn't the point, of course. I'm just offering the observation that how we hold our hands reveals something about our emotions and accessibility.

And I'm offering an image to inspire us:

"Do not fear, O Zion, do not let your hands grow weak" (16b).

Picture yourself with one hand in God's hand--strength, love, and compassion flowing into you and supplying the energy, strength, love, and compassion necessary for you to extend your other hand and aid someone in need.

We have work to do. Peace and justice work of caring for others and for creation. For us to extend a hand in neighborly love, the other hand needs to be lifted in praise. In this way, we acknowledge and connect with God's love and allow it to flow through us to the hurting world.

God has come to dwell among us and to save us, wiping away our shame and tears and fears.

We are invited to respond with loud singing, to rejoice and exult with all our hearts. This is no lukewarm clapping of the hands to a catchy melody. This is all-out, full-throated hallelujahs! It's "606" with a million-voice choir and hands thrust into the air.

For God loves us with a love that is eternal. And God promises, "He will renew you in his love" (v. 17).

For this purpose, our Lord Jesus came and was born in Bethlehem, *love's incarnation*.

Thanks be to God!

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