

December 15, 2024

Third Sunday After Advent

“His Delight”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

How is it that a Christian comes before God? Humbly. Fearfully. Repentantly. These are true, or at least I hope so. We are fallen, rebellious creatures who, try as we might, cannot come close to keeping the good and holy law of God, so yes, we come before Him ashamed, knowing we do not measure up to His perfect standard.

Yet, knowing God is love, and out of that love He has sent His Son into our flesh to die and rise for our forgiveness, we also come before Him joyfully as one who has been pardoned from the punishment we deserve, as if we were justly on death row but have now been set free. We rightly praise God and give Him continual thanksgiving.

So coming before God is shame and joy on our part. But let me ask you this: have you ever considered how God views you as you come before Him in shame and joy? That’s kind of a tough one, mostly because God is so far above and beyond us it’s kind of futile to try and know His mind. But we do think about it and His Word does reveal His nature toward us. His Word tells us. There’s been more than a few times I’ve come before God in dread, knowing that my willful sins rightly deserve His anger—I’d be angry with me if I were in His place. Yet, pondering His promises fulfilled in Christ, I know that’s not true. Adopted by grace, God sees me as His beloved child. Still parents sometimes are not too happy about their kids’ life choices, so even in Christ I may think God is just kind of putting up with me.

I think that’s where a lot of Christian might end up in their thinking: I’m a poor, miserable sinner struggling to live a life of repentance, yet redeemed by Christ so joyful and hopeful looking toward eternity. Compassionate and loving God looks down on me, loves me, forgives me, yet kind of shakes His head and face palms as He sees me trying to get with the program.

But Zephaniah today gives us a promise of hope that should fill us with joyful expectation about how God our Father will one day regard us, even how He regards us this very day in Christ! Mind you, Zephaniah just spent two-plus chapters speaking destruction and judgement upon Israel, Judah, Jerusalem and all the Gentile nations because of their idolatry and evil. But he, speaking God’s Word in truth, suddenly switches gears, declaring how at the time of judgment things will change, and the people will be changed.

*“On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.”*

Believer are this people. We seek refuge in the name of the LORD, Jesus Christ our Savior. In Him there is a judgment, and through forgiveness we are justified, declared “not guilty” and cleansed of injustice. Though that fallen nature yet clings to us, we are viewed by God through Christ as righteous. And one day soon, this reality will be brought to completion and perfection—the fallen sinful nature banished forever, and the brokenness and pain infecting this creation along with it.

But the wonderful point I want to make comes in our reading today. God speaks through Zephaniah of His work, *“The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies.”* He declares the presence of Christ: *“The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.”* This is our truth today in Christ.

But listen to how the prophet describes God’s reaction to us as the fruits of His work: *“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”*

We’re used to singing our praises to God with rejoicing. But God rejoices over us with gladness. God exults over us with singing!

I want you to let that picture sink in. The all-powerful God of Creation who sits in judgment over all things is ecstatic over us poor, miserable sinners when we humbly, fearfully and repentantly come before Him in faith!

He isn’t woefully sighing over that fact that He once again has to forgive our sins as if that is a burden to Him. He is not shaking His head and face palming in embarrassment over our failures. He isn’t grumbling, wondering why we haven’t gotten any better at the practice of our life. He’s joyful, even rejoicing with song!

This really shouldn’t surprise us. I mean, how many times have you heard Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. The father in that story is the same way—overjoyed at the return of the sinner. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, in the end there is great rejoicing. Yet I think we find this concept challenging to accept.

Why? Because to do this is way too gracious, too merciful, way too giving and loving and forgiving than we can comprehend, and maybe accept. We often focus on ourselves and our guilt and it’s tough even to accept that God would pardon all that for the sake of Christ, let alone rejoice over us as we shamefully beg His mercy. Yet He does! He does and there really is no question about that!

Maybe a bad analogy for this is a Father at a T-ball game watching his child struggle to hit the ball, run the bases in the wrong order, and getting distracted and going to the dugout before he or she even reaches home plate. But this is the Father’s child and he delights in this child simply because the love of the Father for this child trumps all things. How will the child respond? By continuing to play T-ball to the Father’s delight!

So I want you to remember this truth of your Heavenly Father when you come before Him humbly, fearfully and repentantly begging His pardon for the sake of Christ. Be joyful at the forgiveness He gives in the absolution, daily in your baptism, on Sunday in the Supper; joyful more for just the fact that your sins are forgiven, but because you can be certain your heavenly Father adores you today and into eternity.

Let the truth of His unconditional love drive you to be joyfully striving to live each day of your life to His delight.

Amen.