

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Christmas music sets the expectation for a happy, merry, joyful season. Just listen to some of the words we hear in songs each Christmas:

“Tis the season to be jolly, Fa la la la, la la la la.”

“Jingle Bells... oh what *fun* it is to ride...”

“Happy Holiday Happy Holiday While the merry bells keep ringing May your ev'ry wish come true”

“Have a holly jolly Christmas, It's the best time of the year”

“It's the most wonderful time of the year!”

Most people thrive on all this joy and the happiness. They love the constant refrain on radio and television, in shopping malls and churches, about the happiness of the Christmas season, about getting together with family and friends. Most people genuinely find this to be a “wonderful time of the year.”

But let's consider two things. 1) Not everyone can manage the joyous Christmas spirit. Christmas is not a happy time for everybody. A lot of people experience Christmas as a blue time. The psychologists and psychiatrists' offices are usually full around Christmas because of depression. And 2) I bet there are moments during the Christmas season when we all struggle with the blues for various reasons.

It was Elvis Presley who popularized the song “Blue Christmas:” “I'll have a Blue Christmas without you. I'll be so blue thinking about you.” Perhaps this song gained popularity because it hit a nerve with so many people. All the happiness themes of the Christmas songs remind some people of what they have lost or what they never had.

Some are blue during Christmas time because they are overwhelmed by grief over the loss of a loved one. Perhaps it is the first Christmas without the loved one. Perhaps it is an anniversary of a Christmas-time death in years past. Perhaps it is the loneliness of no longer having a beloved spouse to share each day. For these people, grief crowds its way in and spoils all the happiness and cheer.

Others are grieving over broken relationships. The most notable of these would be divorce. Divorced people often find themselves saddened by the breaking of the usual holiday routines. Other families still get together but there is so much tension in the air that they are all relieved when the “family reunion” is over and they won't have to see each other for another year.

Some people experience anguish over their loneliness. It seems that everybody is supposed to have family over at Christmas. What about those who have no family?

In fact, there are countless other circumstances which can make this season anything but happy. There are those in ill health, those who are unemployed or facing poverty, or those struggling with depression. All of these circumstances can contribute to a “blue” feeling, which may be made worst by all the expected happiness surrounding them. Maybe all of us can identify at least some sadness in our lives during the holiday season.

Well, I have some good news. Our Scripture reading which we will contemplate in the sermon this morning tells us how we can rejoice this Christmas. Zephaniah tells us to “*Rejoice in the Lord's salvation.*” The reason you can rejoice in his love is twofold. First, **his love and salvation doesn't depend on you.** In other words, God doesn't see how you act before determining whether or not to love you. His love is produced independently of you. Second, you can rejoice in God's love because **his love is for you personally.**

Listen to the word of our God given to the prophet Zephaniah, chapter 3 verses 14-17:

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

The prophecies contained in the book of Zephaniah were originally spoken to the people of Israel living in Judah. The book of Zephaniah is a rather short book, perhaps this afternoon you could take the time to read through this book. If you were to do so, you'd notice that most of Zephaniah's prophecies are not so joyful as the one contained in the portion we just read. In fact they are terrifying prophecies which warn of complete destruction. They vividly describe the wrath of God against the people of Judah and other nations. Why does Zephaniah have such stern warnings?

The answer to this question becomes clear when you know something about the people of Judah at that time. First of all, keep in mind that Israel was God's special, chosen people. Out of all nations on earth, the Israelites enjoyed a special covenant relationship with the Almighty God. A quick look through Israel's history, and you will see how many times God showed undeserved grace and favor toward his people Israel.

At the time Zephaniah prophesied, the Israelites living in Judah were also experiencing many blessings from God. The people of Judah had no powerful enemy. And so they were enjoying a relatively prosperous time. However, the people failed to thank and praise God for his blessings. Instead, the people were feeling self-sufficient and complacent in their sins. Most were ignorant about the true God who had done so much for them. Many had turned away from the true God to worship heathen gods – the cults of Baal and Molech were especially popular. They even worshiped the stars in the sky. In short, the people sinned and did as they saw fit.

Therefore, through much of Zephaniah's book, God tells his people clearly that he is very angry with them for their sin. Zephaniah warns that God's judgment and condemnation on sinful people is imminent. Zephaniah tells them plainly, "*At that time [the time of the LORD's judgment] I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish those who are complacent, who are like wine left on its dregs, who think, 'The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad'*" (Zephaniah 1:12). Such a pompous attitude these people had! They boldly sinned and then boasted, "The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad." They seemed to think that God would not punish sin, and was indifferent about how humans act. How wrong they were!

Zephaniah graphically spelled out for the people the severity of God's judgment against their sin. In ch.1:2-3, God, speaking through Zephaniah, says: "*I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth.*" After hearing this prophecy, who would dare say, "The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad"? God promised to destroy callous sinners. Certainly those who took Zephaniah's message to heart would have been terrified and distressed. All of God's wrath was against them, and destruction was imminent! Certainly the last thing these people would have felt was the joy described later in Zephaniah's book.

In many ways, Judah's situation is similar to our own. We all live in relative peace and security. None of our lives are in immediate danger from foreign armies or from a collapse of law and order. When things are going well for us, don't we also tend to get complacent in our sins? When possible, don't we like to ignore our daily sins and figure they aren't too bad? And like Israel, don't we also tend to turn to other gods? Now I doubt that any of you worship Molech or Baal. But can you honestly say the true God is always the focus and center of your life? Are you as focused on God throughout the week as you are on Sunday morning? When God does not occupy first place in our lives, we are just as guilty as the Israelites who worshiped Baal and Molech. And like those Israelites, don't we also tend to be ignorant of the true God? How many

of us couldn't spend more time reading our Bibles? When reminded of these sins, we like to comfort ourselves by saying, "The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad." We like to think God is only offended by really bad sins like murder or robbery.

But God tells us that he definitely does do something about sin, because he hates sin. That judgment God declared against Judah is the judgment God declares against all sin -- even against us! God also says to us that he will search with a lamp every last dark nook and cranny of our lives looking for sin and disobedience. He promises such sin will be punished. In Romans Paul reminds us "*the wages of sin is death.*" At first glance, we also can't find much reason to be joyful when you consider what our God demands of us and the punishment he exacts when he doesn't get what he demands.

And yet listen again to the joy Zephaniah described: "*Sing, O Daughter of Zion; Shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart!*" What possible reason could there be for rejoicing? Zephaniah gives you the best reason in the world for rejoicing. You rejoice because God's love and his salvation don't depend on you. They are produced independently of us sinful human beings.

Listen as I read part of the text once again. Listen how **God** is the one who is acting. God's love moves him to fix our broken relationship with him. Zephaniah writes, "*The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. . . . The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing.*" See how it is God who initiates and completes his love? It is not a love dependent on us.

What does such a love move God to do? Zephaniah tells us, "*The Lord has taken away your punishment.*" Actually, a better translation of that passage would be, "The LORD has turned aside your punishment." Remember we said that God hates sin and must punish sin. God cannot simply forget about sin. There is no other way – sin must be punished. But our text says that God has turned aside his punishment. If his punishment has been turned aside, that means it doesn't strike us. Nevertheless, God's punishment did hit its target. God loved us so much that he gave for us a substitute. It is that substitute which receives the full blow of God's wrath. Who is that substitute? God gave his very own Son to be the target of his wrath. God's full wrath against sin struck his very own Son Jesus. Think of all of our sins of idolatry where we put other things ahead of God. Think of all of our complacency – all the times we ignored God and his Word and his will. All of the punishment and all of the wrath we should have suffered was side-tracked onto Jesus. God in his love for us, punished Jesus instead of us. That's why Jesus suffered so tremendously. That's why Jesus died on that cross. Not because of anything wrong that he had done, but because the punishment that was destined to destroy us forever in hell, was diverted and turned aside onto Him. And we know our loving God accepted Christ as a substitute. We know he fully paid the price for sin because God raised Jesus to life. God's wrath had detonated, the price for sin was paid for in full.

You know, this kind of love which God has for us is not really comprehensible by our limited, sinful human minds. We can't understand it, but God tells us it's true. St. Paul summarized God's incredible love when he wrote, "*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*"

So do you see why we have such a reason to rejoice? God's love for us doesn't depend on our performance or efforts. Think back in your life and remember the very worst sin you ever committed. Or think about that favorite sin of yours that you keep falling into over and over again. Think of those sins from your past that make you doubt God's forgiveness. Then listen to Zephaniah when he says, "Your punishment has been removed." It was removed by Jesus who was punished in our place on the cross. We certainly have every reason in the world to rejoice!

There is one more great assurance we glean from God's Words through Zephaniah. Sometimes Satan might try to convince you that God's love isn't for you personally, that your sin

was too great. He might tempt you to doubt God's love. But listen to our text once again. Hear how God loves you personally. "*The LORD has taken away **your** punishment, he has turned back **your** enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is **with you**; never again will **you** fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let **your** hands hang limp. The LORD **your** God is with **you**, he is mighty to save. He will take **great delight** in **you**. He will quiet **you** with his love. He will rejoice over **you** with singing."*

God's love is for you personally. He won't forget about you. Zephaniah says, "*The Lord your God is with you.*" He is literally with you at all times. He dwells with you. He's with you at home, he's with you on the bus, he's here in this church. He won't forget about you. He cares about you greatly – so much that he is always present by your side.

Zephaniah describes very vividly God's feelings for you. You know, we often think and speak of our feelings and faith toward God. But how does God feel about us? I think often times when we think of God's love, we think of a sincere, stone-faced, stern God who shows his love simply by not punishing. But verse 17 says, "*He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you in his love. He will rejoice over you with singing.*" That's an aspect of God's love we don't think about very often. God takes great delight in you. He rejoices over you. He's so happy over you he is moved to sing songs. When God thinks of us he is beaming and glowing because he feels such a strong love for us. His love had to be so deep, otherwise he would never have had mercy on us and sent his Son to die for us.

So are you filled with Christmas joy? Maybe you are... maybe not so much. Will everything be perfectly enjoyable this Christmas? Probably not. Will each one of us be bubbling over with happiness each minute of the next couple weeks? Probably not. Will we deal with problems, sometimes longstanding problems that defy solution? Probably we will. But is Christmas still a joyful time? Yes, it most certainly is!

Know and remember your Lord's love for you – his unconditional, undeserved, personal, deep love. Love that moved him to send his one and only Son, born in Bethlehem, to save you. Remember to lengths he went to in order to remove your sin and guilt. Rejoice, people of God, for the LORD does indeed love you with an everlasting love which is beyond understanding!

May this Christmas season truly be merry for you as you keep in mind the words of the apostle Paul: "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" [Philippians 4:4-7]. Amen.