

“The Joy and Delight of the Lord”
Zephaniah 3:14-17 2015

I was at the zoo one time, and I watched while one of the workers was cleaning out the panther's cage. He was an impressive and powerful sleek animal, and as the panther's cage was being swept out, a barrier had closed him off to one side.

The panther was pacing-growling, and obviously not very pleased.

While all that was going on, I also noticed a pretty and colorful little butterfly that was flittering about freely going in and out of the cage past the angry panther... **in a delightful way that proclaimed the joy of creation.**

And what a stark contrast between the frustrated snarling panther, and that happily carefree and bustling little butterfly. Sharp contrast also characterizes the writings of Zephaniah, one of the gloomier, bad news prophets of the Old Testament. He lived and wrote about twenty years or so before the people were dragged off in chains into exile when the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem.

Zephaniah described how faithlessly Israel turned aside from God, and with hard condemnation he announced judgement and doom, warning that the consequences would be destruction & exile.

But then in the passage today, the prophet shifts to Good News, as with great joy he proclaims, God never abandon his people, but would heal, cleanse and restore the nation and people. Here is the promise and Good News, the hope and joy, that despite their terrible sin, losses, defeats and troubles God is still there to accomplish great and wonderful things.

The prophet abruptly turned away from threats, gloom and doom, to a most remarkable section of praise and rejoicing celebrating with promise and assurance that God still loves and rejoices over His people.

vs. 3:14-15

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

And the best part, describes when God sings in victory,

vs. 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.

Consider the promise and picture of joy Zephaniah paints, of the Lord God actually singing over you, rejoicing over you; as in loud joy and gladness He celebrates that **you are His. God, pouring out His love, like a fountain overflowing with grace.**

But we may have a little of trouble believing or accepting all that. The world and the people around us can be harsh and critical, often focused on pointing out our mistakes and failures, judging us and setting our worth by our accomplishments. With that negative experience of being evaluated all our lives, no wonder we may feel unworthy, and find it hard to believe that God actually loves us and actually rejoices over us... **... after all, why would God be delighted or want to sing over us?**

Truth is, it isn't by our good works, obedience or faithfulness. It's not about how wonderful we are, or may even become, but rests entirely upon who God is, by the nature of God.

*** God is love.**

That is who God is, and he chooses to derive great delight and joy from loving the people he has created.

By choice God sees that there is more good in us to love than we could ever suppose, imagine, expect or believe.

And, the heart of the Christmas story, is just that: God's infinite, beyond all reason, abiding and steadfast love.

This world God created, sinned, rebelled and turned against God, and we need the Lord's healing-cleansing-renewing restoration. The writer of the gospel of John describes this in:

John 3:19

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

Jesus, the Son of God, the true Light has come into our world, to cleanse, to heal, to renew and to restore our human lives... **and Christmas celebrates that steadfast, infinite, inclusive and extreme love of God—the Light that shines into our darkness & dreary places, and that brings healing, hope, peace, love and joy.**

This is the message of the Gospel, **God's Good News for sinners**, and a picture and understanding of God and His grace, that is more like a fluttering butterfly than snarling panther.

And when we begin to accept and trust that the Good News is true, and when we begin to experience for ourselves how much God really does love us, even just as we are, that becomes the most significant truth of our lives and it can reorient everything about how we live.

It is not God's intention or desire for our lives to be defined by guilt and shame, or by fear and regret, **nor for us, through good works and religious observance to try and earn God's love or make-up for past mistakes.**

Consider the gracious God that Zephaniah knows & describes:

vs. 17

he Lord is in your midst; you shall fear no more. ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

This isn't an angry God ready & poised to pounce in fierce judgment, **but a gracious loving God singing and rejoicing over us.* So what does it mean for us as we are preparing for Christmas?**

It does not mean "rejoice" as in paste on a false happy-smiley face or try to ignore or deny all your troubles, losses and pain. If things happen to be good and bountiful for you this year --- your family is together, health and finances are sufficient; that's great, and be grateful for all your blessings.

But that's not really what or why we celebrate, and not what will make for a truly meaningful Christmas.

Rather, a truly blessed and meaningful Christmas is when we discover the promise and power of God's loving purpose -- that God's life-transforming love and peace, joy and hope are there for us in the good times, and even amid our struggles.

That means, whatever our circumstance or situation in life or the world, God still delights that we are his, always welcoming us home... and the truth is, God still loves us and is with us and for us... which describes exactly what God did for us at Bethlehem, God in the flesh, born into our world to be here among us--
- and that is the point and the true message of Christmas.

I've got a friend in Washington state who has what I consider one of the more difficult and demanding jobs on the planet. She is an elementary school teacher who specializes in teaching troubled children; the truly incorrigible ones who have been expelled from other classrooms and schools. She deals with unbelievable violence, fighting & issues of abuse. And she says that she manages such a classroom of little monsters year after year, student by student, because she loves them, and her heart breaks for them.

Tara explained to me one time, that whatever violence and abuse these kids inflict upon others, it is still far less than the pain, the scars and terror that these little children are feeling inside. And the rage that these difficult children live and express comes from the terrible and overwhelming ache and suffering, the rejection and graceless-cruelty that they have already had to endure during their own short lifetimes.

Now she doesn't condone or accept their classroom violence, but she does see beyond their immediate external behavior by focusing on their great need for hope and healing.
*** Though they may at times snarl like the angry panther, she chooses to respond with the free grace of the butterfly.**

God has called and equipped this remarkable woman of compassion to give those kids a break by showing them unconditional love... and that I believe is the true message of hope and joy, the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the meaning of Christmas.

As we read earlier,

... Rejoice and exult with all your heart... The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with **loud singing.**