

“Relief”- sermon for December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3:17-19, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-14

Sermon Text, Revelation 21:4, NIV

‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

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What would happen if God interrupted us? What if God barged into the midst of our daily lives, if God made God’s presence known? How would you feel? How would you respond? What change would God’s presence bring?

In Zephaniah’s visions the presence of God brings both judgment and joy. The oracles in the majority of the book announce cosmic destruction as divine judgment for the sins of Israel and, specifically, the priesthood. With vivid and at times disturbing language, the prophet envisions the arrival of the Day of the Lord, the time in which God will act to restore justice and to punish faithlessness.

The Day of the Lord, promises the prophet, “will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.” The Day of the Lord is a calling to account demanding repentance and humility before God’s mighty judgment.

But also in verses 14 and 15 there is a nuance in the prophets announcement. There is good news:

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ 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.

It is a grand reversal as the expected judgment instead for many becomes overwhelming mercy that leads to new life. The arrival of God’s presence dispels fear. It opens the door to a new future. At the same time, God’s presence is disturbing; it upsets the complacencies and faithless habits of the

people. It undermines hypocrisy and indifference.

God vows,

“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm’” (Zephaniah 1:12).

God’s presence will surprise those who assume that God is indifferent and of little consequence to the reality of daily life. God’s presence will also disturb the ones who proclaim faith in the Lord in one breath, but are committed and connected to other gods, that and those whom they truly idolize in life: “I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests ... those who bow down and swear to the Lord, but also swear by Milcom; those who have turned back from following the Lord, who have not sought the Lord or inquired of him” (Zephaniah 1:4b-6). To this hurting people, God promises a new world: “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.”

Not only does God’s presence bring a joy that casts out fear, but it also brings the restoration of justice and aid to the poor: “I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth” (Zephaniah 3:19b). God’s presence brings a new way of life in which the way that people relate to God and to one another is fundamentally different. We read—

Matthew 4:23-25 that what Jesus will be consistent:

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ . . . people brought to him all who were ill . . . , those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

I don’t know about you, but I would welcome this interruption. What would happen if God interrupted us? What in our world would change? What fears would be dispelled? What injustices

overturned? To the one who rules and reigns as the creative, redeeming and sustaining source of all life. Amen.