

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! ¹⁵The 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. ¹⁶On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. ¹⁷The 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."

WHEN GOD SINGS YOUR NAME

Dear Friends in Christ,

What's your favorite hymn? It's a question a pastor asks once in a while. When I ask the question, I can generally tell the difference between singers and non-singers. People who have a love and ability for singing pretty quickly come up with a couple. Then they think about it and say, "No, wait, then there is hymn such-and-such..." and "But I forgot about..." and it becomes clear they really don't have a favorite. They just love hymns. And that is great! There's no rule that says you have to have a favorite.

Then there are those who aren't singers. Most of them do actually like hymns, just not 24/7. Usually they will say their favorite is, "Amazing Grace" or "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and that is good, because those are great hymns. Those are hymns the Christian Church will probably be singing until the day Jesus comes back for his people!

Today is a good day to think about favorite hymns because of two things.

One thing is that after church today we are going to be discussing whether to buy into the new hymnal our synod has put together. I am confident that *if* we decide to do that, in the coming year many of you will have a new favorite hymn. Or, if you are like me and just can't make up your mind about a favorite hymn, you will have several new favorites, in the plural. Please, stay around after church today for that discussion!

The second reason I mention favorite hymns is because of what Zephaniah wrote in our reading. Zephaniah? Who's that? I was pretty sure, but I double checked. I have never preached on Zephaniah in 25 plus years of sermon writing. Nor have I had a Bible study on Zephaniah. It's a tiny little Old Testament book of three or four pages. Zephaniah was a prophet who preached to Israel in a time of religious reformation. Like the time we call The Reformation from the 1500s, Zephaniah's reformation two thousand years earlier had to take place because of an almost complete corruption of faith and godliness. Since the Israelites had become so corrupt, most of Zephaniah's message is about judgment, God's judgment. But in the last half page, Zephaniah unfurls the banner of God's grace for the meek who humble themselves before the LORD. That's where our reading is. In those final encouraging sentences, God's message changes from one of judgment to one of rejoicing and singing. That's the other reason why I asked about your favorite hymn. Rejoicing and

singing comes up again and again in these verses from Zephaniah.

Our reading directs God's people living in a fallen, depraved world to have the joy you have when you are singing your favorite hymn. Have the level of confidence that sends shivers up your spine when you sing "I Know that My Redeemer Lives" on Easter morning, the joy you have when we close the Christmas Eve service with a candle-lit "Silent Night." ***"Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!"*** (By way of explanation, when the Old Testament mentions Zion and the Daughter of Jerusalem, that is what we in the New Testament times call the Holy Christian Church. It is the sum total of all God's believing people. God's invitation to his people is, "Burst forth in joy and singing!")

We Christians were encouraged to confidence and joy in the Philippians reading, too. It was those astounding words of Paul: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"* (4:4) You hear that and you think: "That sounds good, but it just isn't possible. Who can be positive and upbeat all the time?" Then you remember that when Paul wrote that, he had been locked up for a couple years on trumped up charges, and you think, "Maybe I need to try a little harder at this rejoice thing."

But life isn't always like that for Christians. Life isn't always full of joy and singing. Even our relationship with God, our faith, doesn't always feel like that. Even if you are the sort of person who sings lots of spiritual songs, who has a piano and hymnal at home, even Christians like that do not always sing songs of joy and praise to God. Read the book of Psalms and you'll find that out!

Our relationship with God can turn joyless for a number of reasons.

People don't sing and rejoice in God when they turn their relationship with God into a transactional relationship. Think of George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Great movie, but there is a scene that bothers me. You know it. It's the scene where George is in Martini's bar. He's just about at a mental breakdown because Mr. Potter is going to foreclose and his family will be thrown out in the street, and so George prays, "Lord, I've never been much of a praying man, but..." I'm glad he turned to the Lord in his day of trouble, and that's a great place to start. But if trouble is the only time you turn to God and you forget about him the rest, that's not faith, nor is it love for God. It's desperation and a business deal. There's no rejoicing or singing in a transactional relationship with God, any more than there is in me giving \$40 to the gas station attendant so I can fill up my gas tank.

In a very different way, there is no joy and singing in a relationship with God when it is reduced to a code of behavior, rules. It's all "do and do" and "rule on rule" to get to heaven—or to make a nice society here on earth. Martin Luther was familiar with that approach. That was the faith he had been raised and educated in. Later he admitted that he had grown up hating Jesus because he was so afraid of Jesus. He could only think of Jesus as a lawgiver and merciless judge who would punish him severely, because no matter how hard he, Luther, tried, his best was still stained with sin. No joy there. But that too is a problem faced mostly by marginal Christians, or people who aren't Christians, or people

raised in the most legalistic of Christian churches.

And of course, people simply discard their relationship with Jesus for the things of this world, they show they find no joy in faith.

But perhaps most often for sincere Christians, and here I mean those who understand the good news of Jesus as Savior—so I am talking about you and me—perhaps most often, the joy of our faith is tarnished by the things that happen because we live in a fallen world. Just going through life is rough. Rougher for some than others. Those moments in life gone wrong can rob us of joy if we don't keep our eyes on Jesus. The untimely death of a loved one, can rob us and make us only ask, "Why did you have to take him, God?" It's the trauma of divorce or desertion: for the spouse and especially for the children. And then there are the split seconds that change life permanently: a car accident, a robbery, an IED or an artillery round. These are the scars that we bear, the sadness we seem never able to completely get out from under.

We realize that the joyful faith that sings and shouts to the Lord is not something we always have. But Zephaniah focuses us not on ourselves, but on our God. He doesn't just tell people to ignore reality and "Don't worry, be happy." That doesn't work when you are really hurting. He doesn't tell them to suck it up, or to stick their heads in the sand. He says, "***Be glad and rejoice... The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy... he is mighty to save.***" He points us to God and what God has done. Our deserved punishment has been taken away. We could only plead guilty to the countless charges God has against us: sins of thought, word and deed that we commit day after day. But the punishment is taken away, it is taken away in Jesus; forgiven. Don't worry that maybe God is just saving it up for another day. It's gone. And when the cause is removed, the effect will cease. Purified by Christ, we no longer fear Satan or death either (M Henry). We live under God's blessing.

Zephaniah goes on, "***The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you.***" Through every moment of life God's children are assured of his presence and his gracious disposition. We know that he will use the things that look like great evil, yes, we can even say they were evil, even our own evil choices, but God will use that evil for the good of his people. Here's a paradox that can give us joy: We can be scarred for life and yet certain of God's goodness through every moment of life.

Hear the prophet again, "***The LORD your God... will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love.***" Quietness with his love calls to mind a mother with a child. The child has been hurt and mom just hugs and holds him on her lap until the child stops crying. And whatever it was that happened is now just part of life. It doesn't mean it didn't happen. It isn't forgotten. It might even still hurt. But things will be okay because mom is here and whatever it was that happened just doesn't matter that much.

And then there is the last phrase of this reading. It's one of my favorites, "***He will rejoice over you with singing.***"

A while back, almost 30 years now, there was a very popular book written, so much so that there have been many spin-offs and you can still find it "on the shelves" so to speak.

The book is *The Five Love Languages*. The premise is that we people communicate our love in different ways, different languages, if you will. The book says that people speak five different love languages: words of affirmation, acts of service, gift giving, quality time and physical touch. And we each have our own preferred language. Here is where the problem comes in. Often you have people in relationships—parent-child, husband-wife, for example—who speak different love languages and so are constantly speaking past each other. For example, a husband feels and expresses his love through words of affirmation, so he says all kinds of positive, complementary things to his wife, but his wife’s love language is gift giving. All the while she is thinking, “Words are cheap. If he really loved me, he would put his money where his mouth is and buy me some flowers or chocolate once in a while.” Meanwhile she, the gift giver, buys him some little something almost every week, but he doesn’t care. It’s just stuff. He just wants to hear her say that she loves him and respects all that he does for the family. Both love the other and say it, but one is speaking English and the Mandarin.

There are some things that God tells us about his love, but we don’t understand how loving he is, and it’s not his fault. But I think this last phrase speaks a language of love everyone understands. ***“He will rejoice over you with singing.”*** Just imagine that. Pictures God in heaven singing, singing about you, singing your name. Whether or not you appreciate a gift or a complement or a hug, you can never doubt when someone sings a song about you. You know they love you. And when you understand that someone loves you enough to sing about you, what can you do but love them back?

That’s what we hear in Advent when we hear about the Savior drawing near. Every sentence of that, each Sunday, is another song from God about how much he loves you. Every Christian Christmas carol is not so much us singing how much we love God, but a song about how much he loves us.

Now go in the joy and confidence of hearing God himself singing your name and rejoicing over you. Amen.