

**Preacher:** Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Zephaniah 3:14-20

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. The church looks beautiful thanks to the wonderful hands that decorated after worship last Sunday. The downtown area of Hagerstown is filled with lights and color. Many homes are shining with lights and Christmas decor. Radios are now playing Christmas music and commercials on TV are calling us to engage in holiday shopping. But my favorite part of this season is that some of the traditional Christmas Movies are now being shown on TV.

One of my favorites to watch this time of year is the classic "A Charlie Brown Christmas." For many, their favorite scene is when Linus, standing alone on a bare stage, recites the story of Jesus' birth. Linus recites the gospel of Luke as an answer to Charlie Brown's confusion about what Christmas is all about. However, there is one feature of this scene that not many people notice. Just as Linus gets to the part in the story where the angels of the Lord tell the shepherds to not be afraid, he drops his blanket. Anyone who is familiar with the character of Linus knows that he is never without his blanket. There are many scenes in Charles Schulz's comics where Linus is deprived of his blanket and the otherwise cool, calm and wise-beyond-his-years, Linus falls apart. Linus simply cannot be without his blanket, except, it seems, when the Christ child is on his mind. Telling the Christmas story is enough of a sense of comfort that he doesn't seem to need his trusty security blanket. Something about knowing that God is in our midst can bring us such a sense of comfort and peace.<sup>1</sup>

Zephaniah is another one of these stories that can bring us comfort and peace. Similar to many of the prophetic books we have been reading these last few weeks, the prophet condemns God's people for their disobedience which leads to their destruction and exile. But the section of scripture that concludes the book of Zephaniah draws people out of their despair and ends with a note of hope. Zephaniah says that there will be a day when the true king of Israel, the Lord, will come into the midst of the people and there will no longer be a need for fear. On that day, Zephaniah says, "The Lord... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival" (3:17-18a).

It may seem a strange shift of focus to move so quickly from condemnation, fear, and suffering to hope in such a short book. However, it is also a little like the season we are currently moving through. The days are getting shorter, the darkness getting longer. The weather is getting colder and the clouds seem to lay lower in the sky. The ancient human family viewed this time of year with anxiety. They wondered what kind of winter would be ahead and if they would be able to protect themselves from the roaring wind and debilitating snow. Now we simply turn up the heat, bundle up in our coats and turn on the weather to find out what is ahead. Yet, we still may sense this ancient trepidation as we approach the dark and cold. Many battle with seasonal affective disorder this time of year. This is a season of dying so that new growth can come in the spring. As the earth dies, our hearts can get heavy.

But then right in the midst of this season of darkening, we celebrate Christmas. We find our own ways to combat this increasing darkness with lights and decorations to usher in the light of the world. We anticipate the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, God in our midst, this season of advent. In Christ, God's presence brings joy and salvation even amidst of our own fears. Our hearts, although mourning the increasing darkness, can quickly move to joy and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> [homileticonline.com](http://homileticonline.com)

We hear the prophetic hope that God will save us from our own various rebellions and situations of exile and restore us in his love.

It may also seem strange to begin the season of Advent by talking about fear. Maybe your first thought is - fear, at Christmas time? But if you think deeper, no doubt there are things that are troubling you. These are anxious times. So many of us are afraid of imminent catastrophes, real or imagined, because of their prevalence in the news. Whether rich or poor, employed or unemployed, women or men, black or white, the phrase “ain’t it awful?” echoes through our culture as it troubles our hearts and minds. Even as we dwell in the prophetic texts, we can sense that the hope that the prophets announce is coming out of a deep sense of pain and anguish, and yes, even fear.

One blogger said last year that, rather than joy at Christmas, her life was filled with fear. She was freaking out about:

- Whether she forgot to get a gift for anyone she would be seeing on Christmas,
- Whether she bought adequate gifts for her co-workers,
- Whether her children have an equal amount of presents to open,
- Whether she messed up the name tags and gave the wrong gifts to her boys,
- Whether her youngest will think that Santa thought he was a bad boy this year,
- Whether her husband would like his gifts and
- Whether she has money left over to cover for those she forgot.<sup>2</sup>

This is often a stressful time of year for those who are trying desperately to make it meaningful and beautiful for everyone else.

In Zephaniah, the people have literally been removed from their place of safety, their home. They have been forced to take up residence in another land because of their disobedience. Yet, this section of scripture opens with the command to sing! This command is in sharp contrast with the other sounds prophesied earlier in the book: be silent (1:7), cry and wail (1:10), a loud crash (1:10), a bitter sound (1:14), a battle cry (1:16). Instead, here at the end, Zephaniah tells the people to sing, to rejoice and exult with all their hearts because their judgment has been taken away and the Lord is in their midst.

We do not vanquish fear by simply denying or avoiding it. We need to admit that fear is as much a part of the Christmas story as peace and joy. When the angels announce to the shepherds the good news of Christ’s birth, the first thing they say is “do not be afraid.” The angel Gabriel tells Mary “do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.” Gabriel tells Joseph in a dream “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” The simple fact that the angels have to begin with the words “do not be afraid” is an admission that fear is reality, both then and now. It is only by moving through our fears to hope that we can truly grasp the triumphant good news of God coming into our midst. Zephaniah tells us that all our fears are ultimately nothing when God is in charge. When it comes to God’s great plans, fears have no power.

Leonard Sweet tells a story about a certain Native American tribe who had a unique way of training young men. On the night of a boy’s 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was led out into the wilderness to spend the night alone. Most young men, at this time in their lives, had never been away from the security of their tribe. Yet on this night, these young teenagers were blindfolded and taken miles away. When each one took off his blindfold, he found himself in the middle of the dark woods, completely alone.

We can imagine what a terrifying night this was for young boys. Imagination magnified the fear that came with each woodland sound until each rustle became fearsome monsters in their

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<sup>2</sup> [homileticonline.com](http://homileticonline.com)

heads. When dawn broke, the young boy rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around. What he saw was an amazing sight — a tall man, standing just a few feet away, armed with bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there all night long, weapons at the ready: watching over his son, as he slept. Fear was pointless when the Father was so near in the darkness.<sup>3</sup>

This is what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown. This is what we are preparing ourselves for this Advent. We ready ourselves for the Incarnation, the word made flesh that comes and dwells with his people. Christian writer and poet Kathleen Norris says that “Incarnation is the place... where hope contends with fear.” We have nothing to fear when God is with us. The good news of this bright season is not that there is nothing to fear in this life, but rather our fearsome and powerful God has the ability to bring us through our fears and even vanquish them.

So sing, daughter Zion. Shout, O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart. The king of kings, the Lord our God, is coming to be in our midst; you shall not fear. Even now he celebrates over you with song and rejoices over you with gladness. Be filled with hope, for the darkness shall soon be overcome by the light of the world. Amen and amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [homileticonline.com](http://homileticonline.com)