



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

# *The Warrior's Unexpected Weapon*

**December 16, 2018**

**Text: Zephaniah 3: 14-20**

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! 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. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 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 as on a day of festival; I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.



**Sermon:**

“Rejoice and exult with your whole heart,” the prophet calls, “For you shall fear disaster no more.” Think about that for a moment. “You shall not fear any disaster—any more.” Here we are. The third candle is lit. We have journeyed from Jeremiah’s shoots springing forth from the stump of Jesse; we have gone out and heard the voice crying in the wilderness, and now today we come to this passage. Joy is ringing out in the streets; voices lift up in song, “The Lord our God is in our midst.” If we listen to this text—not just from our minds, but if we listen here—from our hearts, we too shall leave this place fearing disaster no more. The people to whom Zephaniah spoke were experiencing profound challenges—powerful forces were on the move. And the most basic elements of human decency were being denied and ignored. The very moral fabric upon which the community had been founded—love of God and love of neighbor—were under threat both from without, from the nations who surrounded them and struck fear in their hearts—but just as importantly—from within. The people were standing on a great precipice, one in which hope waned while fear roamed freely.

As I looked through the many commentaries to prepare for this text, nearly all of them issued the same warning. How could people in our time possibly relate to such things? Such things as being held captive, or the weak of the world bent over by oppression? How could we possibly relate to a time in which shame and fear, loneliness and isolation were fixtures of life? Life was so hard and complicated that it was almost impossible to imagine a way out. Those commentaries were only written a few short years ago, and I don't know about you, but all of a sudden all of that seems frighteningly and sadly too much like the times we live in now. Sometimes I fear that with the daily barrage of news—with the endless news cycles we get that we have gone right past fear to numbness—that stories of gun violence or the opioid crisis or bullying or sexual assault and harassment, stories of shaming in our world—have become so commonplace that it's hard for us to imagine a future without them. And then the spoken word becomes something that's synonymous with attack—rather than salvation or redemption. Schemes and scandals are spoken of far more often than covenant and fidelity. Still, to this day, families are separated; Puerto Rico is struggling, and it is not just fear of disaster playing out in our time but rather disaster itself that never ceases being our companion. I worry that rather than not being able to relate to these things, that instead they have become all too commonplace and that these stories no longer jar our hearts and minds—that instead they just wash over us in their despair.

In the same way restorative prophecies can end up sounding like just more words, or symphonies can fade in their grandeur. But friends, this is Advent. It is a time when we are called to be shaken and stirred—to rouse from our slumber to the memory, not just that God came into our midst but that God comes into our midst whenever we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Jürgen Moltmann reminds us that prophetic hope like the one Zephaniah calls out in this reading is not fleeting or vulnerable, but rather blazes in expectation that God listens, God hears, and God acts. There is expectation because this story has been heard over and over again by the people who call this planet home. The truth is that the future is being redeemed even here, and even in times such as these. It would be far easier to succumb to the numbing reality of our world than to persevere in hope. It would be far easier to stay at home on a cold rainy, sleety day than to rouse ourselves to come into a place like this one. That is not what Advent is all about. That is not why we engage in the dance of confession, repentance, twirling in life-giving affirmation, filled with faithfulness and new beginnings. That is not why we light candles in the midst of growing darkness, that is not why we come week after week to meet and be met by the transforming power of God; we do all these things because we have hope—because we *have* expectation. As John Calvin once reflected, we come because we know by story and by experience that when fear prevails in our hearts, we become lifeless and unable to lift a finger to do anything. But when we have hope, there is a vigor that permeates our body, both individually and collectively, that animates us and puts us on the move.

It's important to take in Zephaniah's call that God is coming in our midst, and it is equally important not to gloss over it in our times, but to see how Zephaniah himself sees it. It's not as we might have expected or harbored hopes in our hearts, for we have to be stirred out of our understandings of salvation that comes deceptively through human strivings—that myth, that belief, that fantasy or that delusion that if only we controlled government, if only we had the power, or if only our mighty and powerful army came to our rescue, then all would be well. Yes, Zephaniah proclaims the coming of a warrior, which is what we sometimes falsely think

we need. But Zephaniah does it in a way that stirs and shakes us out of our complacency and our wrongfully directed gaze. For this is a warrior who saves by *singing*; this is a warrior who rejoices over us with *gladness*. This is a warrior who renews us in *love*. That is the warrior Zephaniah proclaims in our midst—the one who sings, rejoices, and renews.

The exact setting of this writing is much in dispute. But what is not at all in dispute is that this prophet Zephaniah was greatly influenced both by the great prophet Isaiah and stood firmly in the larger prophetic tradition, and that means that we first have to recognize that saving comes in and through God—the one in our midst. The light shines on a people who'd been walking in darkness, and it's on them that God shines the light; it is a coming to and a deliverance from—a reminder of who we are and to whom we belong, as well as where our hope and sure expectation comes. And yet the fullness of saving, the fullness of redemption in the prophetic tradition always involves and engages. That same prophet Isaiah proclaims that when we do the work of the holy, when we break the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free, when we share our bread with the hungry, and offer our homes to the homeless—then our light too shall break forth, and then Isaiah says that our vindicator, that very warrior will go before us spreading love and hope. There are a lot of verbs in this passage about what God will do. But the only thing the people are to do—the only way that commands are placed before the faithful—are to do exactly what the warrior will do. We are simply called to rejoice. We are simply called to exult; we are simply called to break forth in song. Do not give up or give in; instead rejoice and sing, and the weapon of the warrior—that weapon of love will carry us forward, renewing and saving.

In Advent we come on cold rainy mornings to places like this to allow our hearts and minds to be enlivened, to allow our imagination to be stoked, and to be shaken and stirred that our salvation comes not from armies or political parties, from caucuses or coalitions, but rather from God's light coming to us unbidden, unearned, and in unimaginable ways such as the sounds of rejoicing, the exultation of song, and the unfettered gift of love. That gift flows inexorably to us and through us like that great final movement of *Pictures at an Exhibition* leads us forward until we truly fear disaster no more—until our hands are strengthened and our lives renewed, until nothing but beauty and power resonate through the air with everything else put to flight. This piece is grand and glorious; this passage is greater than what we can imagine. While I invited you to listen to this passage through the lens of that great musical work *Pictures at an Exhibition*, but Zephaniah closes his passage with another image. It is the one I want to leave you with. For despite all the glory of God's love and the majestic sweep of God's goodness through creation that unfolds today, the ultimate blessing that Zephaniah talks about in this passage is more gentle; it is more intimate; it is more enduring. At that time God whispers through Zephaniah, "I will bring you home." I will bring you into a place of safety and warmth—a place where you can be surrounded by love, and all fear is literally kept at bay; I will bring you into a place of remembering hope that stretches forth into eternity.

In the midst of the AIDS crisis in the 1980's, when hope was in desperately short supply and when fear's grip was as strong as death itself, an unheralded movie came onto the scene called *Longtime Companion*. It was the first time that the AIDS epidemic was given a face. It was a story told about a small circle of partners and friends who claimed themselves as family and who lived out their lives together. It was a story that unfolded on Fire Island in New York.

Throughout the movie tragedy, grief and death were their companions as one by one each of the members of that beloved family fell sick and died from a disease they do not understand. It ends after many of the friends in that close circle had died, and after countless others had too, but it ends in a way similar to what Zephaniah provides—better than all the glory of a symphony; it ends with a simple scene in which all of them come back on the beach where they had spent so much of their lives—with no trumpets blaring, no swell from the sound track, nor where they running into one another’s arms, but rather there was the deep quiet conviction of smiles that pervaded the relationships—that they were back home together.

There were embraces that lingered until wholeness was restored, and there was a moment of coming back into home where fear was no more. That movie ends with the camera sweeping over the gathered throng, then sweeping out onto the endless seascape—a powerful reminder of the eternity that Zephaniah is talking about that awaits us in the midst of God’s promise—a love that slowly, inexorably refuses to let go like a warrior who comes in strength to sing and rejoice and exult to renew us in love.

It would be easy to hear this reading from Zephaniah as just one more of those endless prophecies of fulfillment, and to let it wash over us, but that would be to miss its point and to forget that Advent is a time for us to be shaken and stirred—a time to remember just how amazing God’s deliverance has always been and how amazingly unexpected will be the salvation that comes in nine days if we just have eyes to see and ears to listen—never dull, never plain—a salvation emerging from the chaos and in simple grace stretching to the endless horizon. That is the joy that is worth celebrating on this day. It is the kind of joy that bursts forth into song like I invite you to do now, rising to sing *Joyful, Joyful we Adore Thee*..



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*