

## **“Behold Your Deepest Joy”**

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Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7

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Theologian Karl Barth once said, “The best words are old words and the best old words are small words.” We use small words to convey deep meaning. Words like “peace,” “prepare,” and “behold.” “Behold” is one of those old words we don’t use much anymore except in church and even then it’s often replaced with “see” or “look here.” But there’s more to this word than that. To behold is more than merely seeing or noticing; it is to be caught in the grip of something great, something glorious.

In John’s Gospel Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd after he’s been flogged and draped in a purple robe with a crown of thorns on his head, and Pilate says to them, “Behold, the man!” It’s one of those wonderful ironies of John’s Gospel where an enemy of Jesus unwittingly invites the world to follow him. And, of course, “behold” is the word the angel uses when announcing good tidings of great joy to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Behold is a word used to draw people in, to gather us up, and reveal God’s glory.

I don’t know how the prophets presented their message when the first delivered it, but I can imagine Zephaniah crowing, “Behold! 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.” It’s an amazing image of healing and restoration. It is God’s deepest joy to restore Israel.

This is the end of a fairly short book of prophecy that portrays Israel pretty negatively. Zephaniah wrote some time toward the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, just before Israel’s exile into Babylon. His listeners did not respond very well to his message. In fact, this chapter begins with the words, “Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God.” The consequences of that are pretty dire. Babylon destroys Jerusalem, flattening the temple and carrying their leaders away. It may already be happening as Zephaniah speaks.

But that’s not the end of it. As we discover over and over in scripture, and, I suspect, over and over in our lives, God refuses to abandon Israel completely. Ultimately the God of Israel is not one of wrath, but is a God of love, and not simply a God who desires to appear loving, but is entirely motivated by love. God looks on Israel in her despair and is overwhelmed by a desire to heal her and bring her home.

But for God Israel is only the beginning. God’s love described in Zephaniah is but a microcosm of God’s desire for the whole world, the whole creation. When God

becomes flesh, when God meets us in Christ, we are swept up into the vision of restoration that lies at the heart of God's desire. We enter God's deepest joy and make it our own.

That's the reality that inspires Paul's words in this passage from Philippians. Imagine his circumstances. He's in prison. He has endured floggings and threats and every conceivable danger in his travels yet he cannot stop rejoicing. I've known people in my life, and you probably have too, who can't seem to find anything good about their lives even though they appear to have everything they could possibly want or need. They are people who seem to have no capacity for joy. And then I've known others, those people who are struck by hardship and illness and loss far more than anyone deserves yet are able to see nothing but cause for joy. You may know a few like that as well, at least I hope you do.

Paul is part of the joy-filled crowd. Through Christ Paul has so completely entered God's deepest joy that he can't contain himself, not even in chains. That's what it means to be caught, to be gripped, to behold your deepest joy. Paul discovers his deepest joy in Christ who is God's deepest joy.

And I suppose as we draw closer to our celebration of Christmas we might be wise to ask ourselves where do we find our deepest joy. Joy is something different from happiness; it runs deeper somehow. I've always thought of happiness as sort of goal-oriented and condition specific. But joy is possible in all sorts of unhappy circumstances. Joy brings us into God's presence; it's when God is in her midst that Israel rejoices. So where do you experience the presence of God?

Advent is a time to ponder that question. It's a time to find a place of peace in our lives, a time to prepare our spirits to draw near to God, a time to behold God's love being revealed within us and all around us. I believe if we can enter that love we'll discover that beholding our deepest joy is only possible so long as we're attuned to God's deepest joy. Draw near to Christ, for through Christ God is in our midst and in Christ alone can we rejoice.

Amen