



Prepare

Isaiah 12:2-4
Zephaniah 3:14-20

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Third Sunday of Advent

We're a bit behind this year, my family and I. We have our Christmas traditions, and even though we've had some practice in setting them up in new places (way too much practice, in fact), there's a lot going on in our house, as I know there's a lot going on in many of yours.

Just this past Wednesday evening the tree finally went up – usually, that happens the day after Thanksgiving. Finding all the boxes after the movers decided to repack everything was a major chore in itself. And then, since we had invited the church staff over for a Christmas lunch on Friday, the lights had to go up on the house. Started at six, Thursday night, and finished at nearly nine.

And that's without mentioning all the other work that had to take place – the house-cleaning, the shopping, the cooking (and re-cooking). We were two hours away from being ready when the first guests arrived, but that's the way it is. Still, everything went just fine.

It's hard work having fun sometimes, isn't it? For many people in our super-fast-paced world today, life is just an endless stream of things that have to be done. Christmas just adds a bunch of other stuff to the list. Sometimes, for some people, all the effort may not seem worth it.

Twenty or thirty years ago, there were those who argued that we'd reached a saturation point, that humans couldn't take much more stress than they already were experiencing then – just recently, I heard a couple of thirty-somethings reminiscing about how much simpler things were “back in the 90's”!

There's a curse that translates something like, “May you live in interesting times.” It's meant to be ambiguous: “interesting” should be something enticing, something exciting, something good. But what makes this statement a curse is that living in

“interesting times” probably involves struggling along through challenge after obstacle so that some historian down the road can say, “Hm. That’s interesting.”

We certainly live in interesting times. There are new and mind-boggling challenges all around us: living in 2009 is not for sissies. Change and uncertainty are our constant companions. But that’s nothing new.

The scriptures speak to us across millennia. Life in the age of people like Isaiah and Zephaniah could not be more different from our Green Valley routines. For a moment, though, put yourself in the time and place of these prophets, in the Bronze Age Near East. Interesting times, too, but for different reasons.

Imagine fetching all your water from a river or a well. Imagine no refrigeration. Imagine hoping that the harvest would see you through the winter, with no supermarket to go to if it didn’t – or whether the crops would fail or be destroyed by insect or blight that you could do nothing about. Imagine starting each day not knowing if some marauding army might be at your city walls or destroy your farm by that afternoon. Or if that cut you just got would kill you. Now that’s a more violent sort of uncertainty.

Zephaniah is not a prophet we hear much about. His work runs three fairly short chapters. The first two and a half deal with how corrupt and sinful God’s people have become, and Zephaniah’s vision is mostly how God is going to punish them and the rest of the world. Zephaniah’s God is just, righteous, faithful, and very, very upset.

And then, where our lesson starts, his whole message shifts. Sure, God is going to punish the bad guys: but Zephaniah sees in that punishment God’s promised salvation, the release of the faithful from the flawed leadership of human kings, and he sees the day when all is set right. And the purpose behind telling his hearers this message – and that includes us – is that so we can rejoice. Yes, rejoice. In the midst of uncertainty, “interesting times” – rejoice over what’s to come.

Today’s Advent theme is “Prepare.” “Preparing” for Christmas is no small affair, is it? And usually “interesting,” too. I mentioned setting up our tree last Wednesday night. Sadie and Seth are old enough now to have some perspective on this process, and old enough to help in some significant ways.

One of which is NOT putting on the lights, particularly the top ones. This seems to end up in most families being a Dad thing, and for some reason, some question the kids asked made both Valerie and me think of our own fathers, the Christmas trees of our youth, and ponder the epic struggle of man versus tree versus lights: it seems that one common thread is adult frustration, when all the kids want is fun. The grown-ups are thinking, “Oh, we’ve got to prepare, to get Christmas ready. Oh, gosh, we’ve got to get that thing out and up”: we’re looking at the chore in front of us. The children are looking forward to seeing it lighting up the living room. They don’t care about even distribution of light and color, they don’t worry about the ornament load, whether the darn thing looks balanced. When you were a child, did you ever just take a handful of those plastic icicles and throw them on the tree? Fun wasn’t it? For you, I mean.

When we did that, it was “doing it all wrong” for the adults, probably. In the end, did it matter? Has the world changed for the worse? And Christmas came, and was wonderful, and that preparation, no matter how awkward or exuberant, was an important part of it. There was joy in the work of preparation. Children saw it right then – we don’t, until later.

What we’re preparing for in Advent isn’t just Christmas, or remembering Christ’s birth, but preparation for God’s new reality, the reality that Zephaniah saw, that made him tell us to rejoice. Unlike Christmas, which has a date on everyone’s calendar, we don’t know when that new reality will come, or exactly what it will look like, or even how to prepare. How *do* you prepare for a huge, world-changing event in the indefinite future? Zephaniah knows: rejoice!

Preparation is the process of making something possible, of getting ready for something to take place. Our preparations for Christmas, for example, all are directed to that one special day, we can enjoy the beauty all the work and worry made possible. But we know when Christmas will happen. How about his great day of the prophets?

In truth, a large part of what we do every day is preparation for things that may never happen – or certainly are unscheduled. Our cars are a good example. Every one of them has seat belts, right? Most of them have airbags and antilock brakes and a whole bunch of stuff that has made ready – prepared – in case we get into an accident. We buy insurance. We do things “just in case.” We do it automatically – it’s part of how we’re wired.

The prophets tell us about this time when God will take charge of this world in such a way that no one will ever be hungry again, no one will ever be sick, no one will ever be robbed or cheated or lied to or die, ever again. That is a vision, and a promise. It is a given. We are to have faith.

Our faith is to live toward that promise, and that, like preparation, is a process. In fact, it’s a process of preparation. Faith is a process, of growth, of preparation. And it is a process of joy in what is to come, even when what we’re doing right now seems like a chore.

You know, Christmas may be a day on the calendar, but kids live it as soon as we let them. It’s something full of delight that’s on its way. Seeing something good already happening is something kids do really well. There’s a fancy theological word to describe this: prolepsis, which means having some part of a future reality happen *right now*. Zephaniah tells his people to rejoice *right now*, even though the future he talks about is far beyond his own time. Kids wake up happy, full of bright joy, with a piece of Christmas in their hearts every day after Thanksgiving. That’s proleptic. They’re living the enjoyment of *then, now*.

We can do the same thing. For you and me, whose Christmas fires have dampened a bit, it means looking for the joy of what’s coming in the midst of getting through the day. It means seeing the Christ in others around us. That shouldn’t be hard: grouchy old Zephaniah tells his people twice in just three verses that this same God of judgment he’s been talking about is with them – to save them. We expect God to be with us: we’ve

sung every week in Advent: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel (God is with us) will come to thee!” Will come, is coming, and also is here.

Preparing for God is like preparing for Christmas – finding joy in the promise of the coming of Christ, the Son of God, Emmanuel. Things may be uncertain; there are worries and tragedies to work through – but still there is joy. It’s like a kid telling the preacher to hurry up the Christmas Eve service so he can get home before Santa shows up. It’s the joy and anticipation of what is to come, is coming, and is in our hearts right now. Rejoice!