

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Joyful news?

The prophet Zephaniah calls for rejoicing and singing at the removal of God's judgement on his people and the turning away of their enemies. God is in their midst, the outcast will be gathered in and their previous shame changed into praise.



Make a decorative paper chain from strips of paper. Think of people who bring joy into your life and write each name on a strip of coloured paper. Leave the pack of paper strips and the pen out where you will see it for a few days and write more names as they come to you. Each time you write a name take a minute to thank God for that person and to pray for them. Hang your paper chain where it will remind you of these joy-bringers.

LISTEN



Listen to Chris Tomlin's song Joy, unspeakable joy. Compare the lyrics of the song with the reading from Zephaniah. Look for similarities in the ways in which we celebrate joy in the run up to Christmas and the joy expressed at God's work in Zephaniah.

Bible notes



Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of the reforming King Josiah (Zephaniah 1:1; 640-609 BC). He is known for his striking images of 'the day of the Lord' (e.g. 1:14-18), which brings God's judgement on Jerusalem's enemies and salvation for his humble people. Some of these images are particularly disturbing whenever there is war in the Middle East, and God is seen as 'the king of Israel' (v.15) in the midst of Jerusalem, 'a warrior who gives victory' (v.17). So, we must take great care how we interpret this short book. These closing verses call for rejoicing because God's people are no longer living under the divine judgement that had them deported from their ancestral land to Babylon. During this exile, they would have been aware of the oppressive presence of a foreign king dominating their daily existence. But now it is not their enemies but 'the king of Israel, the Lord [who] is in your midst' (v.15). In their world, the most powerful are those with the biggest armies and the most effective fighters. So, it is not surprising that Zephaniah pictures the Lord as he does. But he modifies his image: 'he will renew you in his love' (v.17). His people's 60-year exile was ended by the Persian king Cyrus seizing power in Babylon in 539 BC. He then allowed exiled nations to return home. Isaiah 44:24ff (which most scholars date towards the end of the exile) sees Cyrus as the Lord's anointed. The return home is the reason for the gladness seen at festival times (vv.17-18). Joy renews confidence, removes fear and shame, and holds out the prospect of national renewal. This is good news, especially for those who feel particularly excluded, such as the lame and the outcast, who can now believe that they too have a future.

First impressions

- What brings you joy?
- Where in the world/your community would you like to see more of God's joy?
- What opportunities do you have to share the joy of Advent this week?

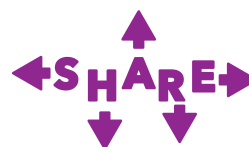


Pray

Give us joy in our hearts,
keep us praising because of your love for us.
Give us your joy and peace,
even when things go wrong.
May we bring joy to other people who are sad.
Give us joy in our hearts, keep us praising,
keep us praising till the break of day.
Amen.



Pray for those who you know, or those you read about in the news who are experiencing difficulties at this time. Pray for them to experience God's joyful news.



Share a story from your life where you have experienced God's joyful news.