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HOW GOD CALMS HIS CHILDREN by Edward Frey

Zephaniah 3:14-3:17

“Calm” is probably the last word that would characterize these few days before Christmas. The pressures of deadlines and last minute planning can cause a lot of stress. Too often the season of Advent is not calm, nor are the places we find ourselves. Frequently, our lives more often resemble the chaos of holiday traffic.

We all know we could use some calming down, so does the Lord. That is why the words of Zephaniah settle on our ears today. As we meditate on this section of God’s Word, it becomes obvious that the calm we desire is not something we can obtain for ourselves. The calm and silence we need in order to rightly prepare our hearts for Christmas can only be the result of God’s doing

1) He Sweeps Away Our Enemies

It’s difficult to calm an anxious heart. If you’ve ever been aroused from sleep by a tender child, and commissioned to fight the monsters and ghouls who dwell in that netherworld of dark bedroom closets or underneath beds, then you know just how hard it can be to calm an anxious heart. Similar fear and anxiety gripped the hearts of God’s people in Zephaniah’s day. This was a time of storm and stress when the doom of entire nations – including Judah itself – would be sealed. The whole world seemed to be often pawns in the hands of such imperial monsters as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon.

In addition to the political and military unrest, rampant idolatry infected the nation of Israel. The people toyed with such monsters as Baal and Molech, and were even involved in the nightmarish practice of sacrificing their children to such foreign gods. Worship of the Most High God was at

an all time low. It was difficult for the average Israelite to remain calm. There were physical and spiritual monsters on the loose. All the while, God warned his people not to pursue such things. The prophets warned them of the nightmares if they toyed around. God said that he would purge his people of their unfaithfulness. Prophet after prophet announced God's impending judgment. Then there were those false prophets who proclaimed peace to this rebellious people. God's prophets were to be ignored: "Don't pay attention! Trust in our leaders, their policies and coalitions."

Tensions ran high. Hearts were filled with anxiety. The monsters causing the chaos were often the ones inside them, tempting them to sin and follow other gods. Calmness was a highly sought-after commodity that could not be found. Yet, Zephaniah managed to pronounce a message of hope and calmness in a time of unprecedented stress. Even though the prophet had to tell the people that their land and lives would be devastated because of sin – the monsters would seem all too real – yet the Lord would still rescue them from destruction. God would sweep away his people's enemies. He would put himself into the fight even though his people didn't deserve it. So the prophet says, "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!" God would kick open the closet door. He would peer under the bed. The Lord would turn the known world on its head, as he would purge Israel and Judah of their fears. Just as a parent forces a timid child to look into the empty closet or under the bed to prove all monsters have vanished, so God would force his people to face Babylon and Assyria by leading them into those nations as captives and leading them out again. They'd see firsthand that all those false gods are nothing more than stone and wood. The Lord almighty would lead his people to see that he is the great "monster slayer"; he is the one, true God.

It's obvious that God will give his people every reason to sing, in the face of fear, sin, and failure. In fact, the Holy Spirit led Zephaniah to refer to the people in an intimate way:

“Daughter of Zion, and Daughter of Jerusalem.” Zion was the hill on which the temple stood.

Jerusalem was the city where the king lived. Here the prophet is painting a picture of God's royalty who are his through faith. This is a picture of you and me, and all believers. The Lord is talking about that spiritual remnant, his faithful, who would be saved from the fiercest enemies.

Regardless of what troubles come our way in this life, God is our monster slayer. He's done more than simply conquer enemies like the Philistines or Assyrians. God gives us the reason to be calm and joyful: “The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.” God has removed judgment from us, and has conquered our enemies. Our foes may not be ancient world powers, but we can trust God to sweep away our adversaries. And he does.

In fact, Christ has swept away our most intimidating foe— the last and greatest enemy -- Death. If you've ever lost a loved one, then you know this enemy is powerful. The death of a loved one makes it difficult to face life, especially during the holidays. It's hard to face that favorite restaurant: how choked up that empty chair can still make one feel. It's difficult to face the birthday on the calendar: there's no need for a cake because no one is there to blow out the candles. Or like the wedding anniversary: the number of years together seems to be frozen by death. Or like Christmas: there is no one with whom to share any gifts.

Sudden lumps in the throat and sharp tears in the eyes. Death is so cruel because it tries to rob us of all calmness. Only God can calm anxious hearts because he promises to turn our enemies away from us. The LORD, the King of Israel, has come. Just as God promised, the Messiah was born. And Jesus took on sin, death, and the devil for us. Our Lord's been through it all himself –

the agony of his cross, the reality of his tomb. But with his resurrection, Christ has kicked open the closet for us. He's turned on the light and looked under the bed – no monsters there! Jesus has cut our monsters down to size and has swept away the pieces. With his full payment for sin, the devil can no longer accuse us. Jesus has shattered death's chains. He sealed shut hell's doors. And he has swung open the gates of heaven for you and me.

Indeed, God calms his children.

2) He Lulls Us In His Arms

Sometimes you just can't reason with a frightened child. Quivering lips, bloodshot eyes, body shaking uncontrollably because of the intense sobbing – the best a parent can do is grab the frightened child and hold him tight. And what's the child's reaction? He grabs onto mom or dad's neck as tightly as he can. Eventually a sense of calm overcomes the child. "No monsters here", mom whispers as she gently rocks back and forth, stroking her child's head.

This Advent season your Savior is reaching out to you; ready to embrace you with all of his Christmas love. And the prophet is right there with these words of comfort: "On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.'" Another portion of Scripture brings calmness to us complement the prophet's words: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord."

There's the calm; there's our silent, holy night when all was calm and all was bright! No intimidation there! The God of the universe who is clothed in glory supernal – he comes to us in meekness, in a gentle all-too familiar way. He comes as a helpless infant. And in doing so, he

wraps his arms around us and calms us, his children, with his love. The LORD our God is with us, he is mighty to save!

Still we become distracted. The holiday rush is on. The whistle has officially been blown, and the mad dash to Christmas has started. The hustle and bustle, the traffic, the pressure of deadlines – it can all seem to get to us. And you think to yourself: “Silent Night! Yeah right! All is calm! What planet are you from?”

A story is told a story of a woman who was out Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and everything else imaginable, and after hours of hearing both her children asking for everything they saw on those many shelves, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids.

She was feeling what so many of us feel during the holiday season time of the year -- overwhelming pressure to go to every holiday party, taste all the holiday food and treats, getting that perfect gift for every single person on our shopping list, making sure we don't forget anyone on our card list, and the pressure of making sure we respond to everyone who sent us a card -- finally the elevator doors opened and there was already a crowd inside. She pushed her way into the elevator, dragged her two kids, all her bags of stuff behind. When the doors closed she couldn't take it anymore and stated, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot." From the back of the elevator everyone heard a voice respond, "Don't worry, we already crucified him."

don't let your hands hang limp this Advent and Christmas. Reach out and embrace your Savior. Don't let your arms grow tired from all those shopping bags. Put them down and embrace your Savior. Don't let your hands go numb from signing all those greeting cards. Stop and embrace your Savior. Embrace your Savior who has embraced you with his gentle love. And sing. Sing

because you know that Jesus brings a calm to your life that cannot be purchased, wrapped, or tasted. Sing because your God is mighty to save. Sing and rejoice because you know how God calms his children. Amen.