

Zephaniah 3:14-20
“I Will Bring You Home”
The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021

The Reading:

¹⁴ *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

¹⁵ *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.*

¹⁶ *On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.*

¹⁷ *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*

¹⁸ *as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.*

¹⁹ *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.*

²⁰ *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.*

There's a commercial on TV this holiday season. In it we see a middle-aged African American woman buying her gifts easily, online, with the help of Amazon. We don't know if she is a grandma or an aunty, but she's known as "Bear Hug Betty." Since her quick shopping has afforded her extra time to visit others, the commercial next shows her with a huge smile on her face, receiving two little ones into a willing, pillow hug. The

narrator instructs them: “Settle in kids; you’ll be there a while!” And just when they think the hug is over, she clings: “Ooh, where you going?”

The point for me is *not* what this commercial is selling, but the story it tells of **gathering one another up**, especially during the holidays.

There are people like Betty who have the gathering instinct. There is nothing they want more than for us all to be HOME in the biggest sense of that word.

Who is it in your life? The one who wants you to come home for Christmas? The people you know that long to greet and hug others, even strangers? Those who are eager to see the circle form? Who agree that “The more we get together the happier we’ll be?”

It might be the host who always invites someone without relatives – those who may be feeling alone - to their holiday table, a teacher who welcomes students into the classroom, a therapist who shepherds a recovery group, an activist and peacemaker who recruits others to work with them for God’s justice and mercy.

My brother-in-law, Paul Van der Grift, brought so many people together in life and in death, and at the memorial service there were others in the family who lamented that we ought not just gather at funerals, lobbying for reunions and more contact.

Zephaniah was like this. We see his gathering instinct in his oracle read this morning. He lived during the reign of King Josiah, fifteen kings after Solomon, and supported Josiah’s reforms – political and faith reforms intended to bring the people closer to God and justice. It wasn’t that the nation was flying ‘off the rails,’ but there was ennui and corruption. Plus, it was dealing with threats from neighboring nations. So Zephaniah warned them of the destructive side of “the Day of the Lord,” when God would sweep everything clean and start over, unless they kept their covenant.

In our chapter, he also described the *bright* side of the Day of the Lord, when God would gather them home again. It wasn’t that they weren’t geographically home. Zephaniah’s historical time frame was *not* the later century when Judah was captured and carted off to Babylon. No, God’s people were still home in Jerusalem, but not ‘home’ in God and with God’s ways. Hence the warning and the promise Zephaniah gave to them (and us).

Zephaniah is telling us that God has the gathering instinct. The Ultimate Force of the Universe wants to bear hug the world and make things right in it for all. This is something to rejoice about today!

Then, in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus Christ, who was *also* like a mother hen! In Matthew 23:37 Jesus says to Jerusalem: “How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!” Jesus wants us to be “home,” too, not only this Christmas, but NOW and in the future. **This is something to rejoice about today!**

This is why we read this passage from Zephaniah at Advent on Joy Sunday. Because we are anticipating the coming Day, even soon, when we will be gathered. Verse 20 in Zephaniah: “I will bring you home.”

Of course, we have to be willing. There are no forced hugs in the true embodiment of faith. Christ does not guilt us into gathering. The Holy Spirit persuades,

but respects the “No.” That’s why the words of Jesus over Jerusalem are a lament: “I wanted to get you chicks in close, but you were not willing.”

In Ann Tyler’s novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, the middle adult son, Ezra, tries to bring his family together. Indeed, he builds a business called the Homesick Restaurant to gather folks. Decades earlier, Ezra’s father, Beck, left him, his mother, brother, and sister, and the reason why was always a mystery, a mystery that left them wounded and limping.

On the occasion of their mother’s funeral, Ezra set the table one more time, prepared the meal, and invited their long-gone Dad. But in the awkwardness of gathering, his brother Cody argued with their father, and Beck left the house before the meal ended. Ezra cried out: “Please! For once, I want this family to finish a meal together. Every dinner we’ve ever had, something has gone wrong. Someone has left in a huff, or in tears...Come on! Everybody out, cover the area, track him down!”¹

Eventually Cody found him, and Beck *did* allow himself to be gathered home.² He rejoined Ezra, Jenny, Cody, Ruth, and Luke at the Homesick Restaurant, a new beginning.

Madeleine L’Engle writes: “God came when the need was deep and great. In the mystery of the Word made flesh, the maker of the Stars was born. We cannot wait till the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice, or to share our grief, to touch our pain. God came with Love. Rejoice! Rejoice! And go into the Light of God.”³

¹ Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 337.

² *Ibid*, 343.

³ Madeleine L’Engle, excerpt from “First Coming.”