

## REJOICING IN LOVE

Zephaniah 3:14-20; John 1:1-14

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

The writers of “The Mentalist” only brought Jane and Lisbon together in the final season. The same was true for William and Julia on “Murdoch.” This thwarting of love is a common device in many television dramas. They, of course, took it from classic literature. Some of you will recall L.M. Montgomery’s children’s classic *Anne of Green Gables* where Gilbert Blythe is the victim of Anne’s displeasure until she finally recognizes love. And there’s Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth and Darcy add to the catalogue of missteps in love. You might think of these “love interests” as modeled on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* except that a happy ending is imagined instead.

In these stories, circumstances bring together two people who for some reason do not “belong” together. Romeo and Juliet belong to feuding families. Personal pride and social prejudice separate Elizabeth and Darcy. Jane’s “tricks” do not sit well with the serious, crime-fighting Lisbon, at least at first. And yet the chemistry is there almost from the beginning, even while opportunities are missed over and over again through misunderstanding and ill-timed interruptions.

So choose your favorite “love interest” and set that story next to Zephaniah. Zephaniah has become among the most fortunate prophets from the Old Testament. You see, the text we read this morning is the only thing we ever read from this prophet. So we get... just the happy ending. Nobody realizes that prior to this oracle of salvation, Zephaniah spoke eight oracles of judgment. We hear just the happy ending without the mishaps.

We hear the call to sing and rejoice. We hear the announcement of the end of judgment, of rescue from the enemy. We hear about the renewal of love and the invitation to return home. The lame are saved. The outcasts are gathered. The fortunes are restored. The happy ending!

But we only need to read back to the beginning of the chapter to know that it has not been smooth sailing. Talking about Jerusalem, the prophet says, “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.”

So I don’t know much about Zephaniah, and I suspect that there are not many people who do. It’s just a small book that even scholars take just a passing glance at before moving onto Jeremiah or Isaiah. From my scant resources I gathered that he probably prophesied early in the reign of King Josiah before Josiah initiated his reform, a reform that many believe shaped the future of Judaism. This is about 650 years before Jesus and 250 years after David.

For about 75 years leading up to the time of Zephaniah, the reigns of the kings are summarized in this way: the name of the king, the king's mother, how many years they reigned, and this statement. "He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as his father... had done." This is the mishap that derails the relationship with God again and again and again during the period of Israel's monarchy, and it is what Zephaniah spends two and a half chapters railing against before springing the happy ending on us.

Now I've never really thought about the Bible this way, but think of it as a romance; a story about the love between God and a people that has a lot of trouble getting off the ground. Season after season, king after king, overtures are made and just when you think God and people are about to come together something steps in the way. But the last word is love. Zephaniah goes through eight oracles of judgment, but the ninth promises God's continuing presence and love.

Zephaniah says, "He will renew you in his love." I love how the *Tanakh*, a Jewish commentary on the text, translates this. "He will soothe you with his love." When we love someone and are loved in return, we sometimes get something wrong. The moment we realize that we misunderstood something or said something that we didn't mean, the anxiety starts up. We don't know how to fix it. We're afraid that it may mean the end of it. Only the reassurance of the other's love ultimately "soothes" us. And from that springs the joy.

Christmas is this kind of romance. John gives us the abstract version: The "word becomes flesh" and dwells among us "full of grace and truth." He comes into the world, but the world doesn't recognize him and won't receive his overtures of love. Obstacles get in the way, but in the end, when awareness dawns upon us, we are given "power to become children of God."

We don't hear the word "love," but to be received into the family of God is the love that renews us, and from which joy springs forth. The story lacks the specificity of our own faith journeys, the list of obstacles that obscure our recognition of God's love: the disappointments that make us hesitate to act with courage, the injury or illness that interrupts the joyful routine of life, the denial of our strong desire that cause us to question the generosity of God, the consuming revenge that blocks the comforting presence of God. Every year we are given reason to turn from or question God's love. And every year, we return to this story of Word made flesh, the baby in a manger, which affirms God's continuing love no matter how far we may have strayed from love's path.

For thirty years I have been privileged to talk about this event each December and it has never grown old. There have been Easters that were challenging to bring a fresh message, but never Christmas. There are some who talk about a "resurrection faith" but I have always felt more comfortable with those who describe faith as incarnational. Perhaps I'm being too picky about words, but there's something about "new birth" that speaks to my heart more powerfully than "rebirth."

In the coming year we will take notice of Jesus' baptism. We will attend to the stories of his ministry, his teaching, healing, and wondrous acts. And we will again participate in his crucifixion with words of denial and acts of betrayal. We will breathe a sigh of relief and rejoice at his resurrection, and we will struggle to adapt to his departure and attune ourselves to the work of the Spirit. Some years we will come back around to the birth strengthened in faith and some years our connection to God will be held by a single thread. But whether we've been bad or good, the birth lies before us; the birth that says God has come among us again.

But it is not the same as last year, because every birth is different. Every birth is new. Look at the baby. He is not the same as last year because you are not the same. It sounds weird to say it like this, but this infant knows about your year, about the highs and lows, the joys and concerns, the acts of faith and the crisis of faith. Whether the year has been smooth or rocky, this infant gives notice of the constant love of God. It is both the first word and the last word that God will speak to us. It is love that soothes us and renews us and calls us to rejoice. Thanks be to God! Amen.