I want to look at the book of Zephaniah as a whole and then at our reading from Zephaniah to get a full picture of the joy that comes from our Old Testament passage.

The prophet Zephaniah lived during the final decades of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It was when King Josiah attempted to bring about real change in the land. He was removing idols and restoring the temple to the worship of Yahweh alone. But Israel was too far gone. Worshipping other Gods was too entrenched in the life of the people. And it ended up that Josiahs pride led him to a tragic death on the battlefield as he set Jerusalem on a collision course with Babylon. And Zephaniah? He had seen all this coming. For years, he had warned all the leaders of Jerusalem to repent and bring about change. And this small book is a collection of his poetry designed to summarize his message. The book is designed to have three main parts. The first focuses on the Day of the Lord’s judgment that will be coming on Judah and Jerusalem. The second part is about the day of the Lord’s judgment on the nations. And the third section explores the hope that remains for the nations and for Jerusalem on the other side of God’s judgment.

The first section opens with this shocking reversal of Genesis 1. God’s good and ordered world is going to descend back into disorder and darkness and chaos. Becoming uninhabitable. And as you continue reading you pick up on Zephaniah developing these powerful poetic images to describe how Jerusalem’s world is going to end. All of the city’s institutions for worshipping the gods of the Canaanites, will be destroyed. All of the leaders who perpetrated injustice and encouraged child sacrifice, all the economic centers where crooked lending and borrowing took place, all of it will be gone along with the cities walls. Everything is leading to a great army that is going to take out Jerusalem.

What is interesting is that Zephaniah never says whose army will bring the destruction, we know from other prophets that it is Babylon. And it’s because he wants to recognize God’s role in orchestrating the rise and fall of the city. And actually, that is what gives Zephaniah hope. Not that Jerusalem as a whole, can avoid its fate, but in the closing poem of section 1, he calls on anyone in Jerusalem who would seek the Lord and says these will make up the faithful remnant, the people who could be spared if they repent.

During the second section of the book Zephaniah changes his focus to include the nations around Judah. So, the Philistine’s, the Moabites, the Ammonites, even the Assyrians. He accuses them of injustice, corruption, and violence and arrogance. He predicts that all of them will fall before Babylon as well. And the final part of this section, Zephaniah tells us that God is going to gather all the nations, including Jerusalem and pour out his burning indignation. God’s justice becomes this consuming fire that devours evil from the land.

This is really intense and this final line of the second section that brings us into the final part of the book comes as a total surprise. We discover that this burning fire of divine judgment is not aimed at destroying people. Rather, its purpose is to purify the nations, including Jerusalem. So, the section begins as God says that He is going to heal and transform the rebellious nations into one unified family. And that after being purified they are going to turn from their evil and call upon the name of the Lord. These images all point to the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12. That God would find a way to bless the nations. And Jerusalem as well.

And this is where our reading picks up. The very last verses of the three-chapter book of Zephaniah. So let us pick up with Zephaniah 3:14 “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!”

This is amazing. Remember the prophet had just been all doom and gloom. The people are going into exile, this is sad. They are going to be removed from the familiar and taken into the unknown. They are going to be in exile for years and be used as labor. They will lose the ability to sacrifice to God. They will lose their temple. And yet after all of what Zephaniah has told them, God declares for them to sing along and rejoice with all their heart. And the questions is why? Why would they rejoice, what do they have to be happy about, joyful about?

The answer comes in verse 15 “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.”

And the preceding verses which proclaim that God is going to restore Jerusalem and so Israel should sing and shout with joy. God will save and redeem them from both their enemies and their iniquities. God is going to deliver them.

Now you may be thinking to yourself. If God is going to restore them, and God is going to deliver them, then that is plenty reason for the people to be rejoicing and celebrating. Of course, they should get on their knees in thanksgiving, they should shout from the hills praise and adoration. They should be jubilant. They should be having one of those prodigal son celebrations because that is in essence what is happening. Israel has been the prodigal daughter. She had gone astray for many years after trying to do it on her own with her own king. It started with Saul, and Saul was good at first and then he went downhill. Then the monarchy was given to David, and after David, it was Solomon. And it did not take long for the kings of Israel and Judah to lead them astray. The welcoming of idol worship and injustice came swiftly with it.

And yet. Through it all, there was a remnant. A remnant of faithful followers of Yahweh, who never abandoned their worship of the true God. They returned to Jerusalem years later to rebuild the temple, and they started with the altar so that they could sacrifice to God and show their commitment to God, and then the walls of the city of Jerusalem, the place where God dwelled on earth.

And with the building of the temple, and the building up of Jerusalem, came the pronouncement that would ring true for years to come, until its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. God told the people in verse 16 and 17 to not fear, because something greater than just deliverance from exile was coming. Rejoice because the rightful king was going to take their place on the throne, and it was God. Yahweh was going to come and sit on Davids throne. That the people did not need to fear not having a leader because Davids dynasty had no descendent to rule, they did not need one. They didn’t need one because God would be in their midst and that God was going to give them victory.

Like lets be honest, there is enough hope in their in and of itself. This would be enough. But it does not end there. To me this is the most important verse or statements in the book of Zephaniah. All the things we have noted are things to be hopeful about. We can all agree on that. God would be the mighty warrior to lead them to victory, that’s hopeful. God going to restore Jerusalem, that is hopeful. God coming to sit on the throne and be in their midst, my oh my is that hopeful.

Here are some of the best words that we can hear from God about us, it is akin to well done good and faithful servant. Here it is. “he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

It is striking that in this verse (verse 17), some of the same words for “rejoicing” come up again; but this time, it is the LORD who is the subject of the verbs! Human beings are not the only ones who are filled with joy; God, too, bursts into song! Why? Because the relationship is restored. The love between God and Israel is renewed.

Any of these images, of course, could provide fruitful hope: God as forgiving judge, God as saving king and warrior, God as tender shepherd. Perhaps one of the most powerful images, however, on this Sunday devoted to joy, is the one that depicts God as the one who bursts into song with joy over God’s beloved: “He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival” (3:17-18).

Here what Spurgeon had to say “Think of the great Jehovah singing! Can you imagine it? Is it possible to conceive of the Deity breaking into a song: Father, Son and Holy Ghost together singing over the redeemed? God is so happy in the love which he bears to his people that he breaks the eternal silence, and sun and moon and stars with astonishment hear God chanting a hymn of joy.” (Spurgeon)

Such joy is not subdued; it is not quiet or dignified. The Hebrew words used in verse 17 are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe great jubilation. The LORD rejoices over his beloved, over Judah and Jerusalem, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride (Isaiah 62:5). As David danced in front of the Ark of the Covenant, in exultation, so God rejoices over God’s people (2 Samuel 6). As the morning stars sang at the creation of the world, so God sings with elation over God’s beloved (Job 38:7).

We are accustomed to images of God as judge. (Indeed, much of Zephaniah uses such imagery.) We are accustomed to images of God as shepherd, gathering the flock into the fold. But how often do we imagine God as one who rejoices? One who sings? Yet here, in our text, God and God’s people alike are caught up in a joy that overflows into song, a joy that springs from love renewed, relationship restored.

This joy is not one-sided. It is not simply God’s people who rejoice because God has forgiven and restored them. That is an altogether understandable reaction to God’s redemption. It is not simply God’s people who rejoice. God, too, sings and shouts with joy over this love restored. The divine heart overflows with jubilation!

This image of God bears no resemblance to Aristotle’s “unmoved mover,” or, indeed, to many people’s image of a divine watchmaker who sets the world in motion and lets it go.

No, this God is moved, is deeply affected, by human attitudes and actions. This God does not watch from a distance, but enters into the life of the world. This God enters even into human flesh, in the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation.

This Sunday, we speak of joy, the joy of a people redeemed and restored, but also the joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world. God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And we, we who are wondrously and inexplicably God’s beloved, join in the celebration. So, remember beloved of the most high, in this time when we wait for the advent of the Lord, that the same God who sends Jesus to be in our midst, is the same one who rejoices and sings over you, because of what Jesus is going to do, to restore not just Jerusalem, but he restores us to newness of life, and so God rejoices and sings over you. So let us sing too.