**Sunday, March 21st, 2021**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**

Rain can be depressing

            – constant dripping, wet clothes, mud, gray skies, and never-ending   thunder and lightning.

After many days of rain, we hope for the end of the storm.

We plead for the rain to stop.

We listen intently for positive clues in weather reports,

            and search the skies for a sunny break in the clouds.

We impatiently look for the tiniest sign of change.

At first, God's spokesman, Zephaniah, had nothing but doom and gloom

            to tell the people of Judah.

Most of his prophecies warned of God's terrible judgment upon the people.

His words, like the steady pounding of rain,

            continued to beat the depressing truth:

            God was not happy with the way people disobeyed his laws,

            mistreated others, and worshiped idols.

Soon He would punish their sin, wiping out entire nations.

This constant negative warning would be enough

            to depress even the most positive optimist.

But eventually a ray of hope would break through the dark clouds.

Zephaniah was a voice of judgment and warning.

God was angry, very angry, with the way the people were behaving.

He was sending punishment upon the people for all their sinfulness,

            and their attitude of total indifference toward God.

Idol worship and child sacrifice were common practices.

Corrupt officials and faithless people

            broke all the commandments God had given His people.

Zephaniah predicted judgment could not be avoided.

But if they turned back to God, they would discover the Day of the Lord

            was not only a time of punishment,

            but also, a time of God's caring for His people.

There would be a ray of hope, like a ray of sunshine at the end of the storm.

Although Zephaniah saw great gloom and misery,

            he predicted the people could learn to worship and trust God again.

Thus, this short book starts with great gloom,

            but ends with an ecstatic song of joy,

            an anticipation of the kingdom to come after the judgment.

Zephaniah warned the people that God's moral perfection

            meant he could not overlook sin.

God would bring terrible judgment on their sinfulness.

But there would be hope, deliverance, and restoration,

            for those who turned back to God.

The storm would eventually end, and they would walk in the sunshine again.

Sadly, despite all these warnings,

            the Israelites remained complacent and indifferent.

They believed in the Lord, but they also worshipped many other gods.

The story of the Bible no longer seemed important.

They didn't think often of God.

They didn't show up to worship Him.

It no longer mattered to them if they prayed to Him or thanked Him.

They did not think God would do anything - either good or bad.

God was not important to them at all.

“Don’t worry," they would say. "God is not bothered.

            Look, we have been living this way for so long,

            and nothing bad has happened.”

The people shrugged off Zephaniah and ignored his message.

Yet God's intention was not only one of judgment and punishment,

            it was also one or restoration and blessing.

It is not so much a need to obey the rules, but to live as God's people again.

God wants us to experience His love, peace, joy, and forgiveness.

God wants us to live the way He intended, so we can enjoy life to its fullest,

That is the real purpose of keeping God’s commandments and living His way.

Pastor David Peterson was preparing his sermon.

His little daughter came into his room and asked: “Daddy, can we play?”

He answered, “I’m awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I’m right in the middle

            of preparing this sermon. In about an hour, I can play.”

“Okay, when you’re finished, Daddy, I am going to give you a great big hug.”

“That would be wonderful, Thank you.”

She went to the door and then stopped and did a U-turn.

She came back and gave him a huge choking hug.

“Darling, you said you were going to give me a hug after I finished.”

“Oh, Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!”

God is like that little girl, giving us a foretaste of all we can look forward to.

We are able to look ahead with joy, and thanksgiving, and confidence.

We begin to realize how much God loves us.

The God of justice and judgment,

            is also the God of forgiveness and hope.

It was only a little synagogue.

Although it was crowded, it was also filled with great joy.

When the white-bearded Torah reader finished reading the lesson,

            he took up the heavy scroll.

And as if he had miraculously shed many of his years, he began to dance.

Another elder took up another large scroll and joined him in the dance.

The two joyful men danced for what seemed to be an interminable length of time,

            circling about one another with their Torah scrolls,

            advancing upon one another,

            backing off,

            and all the time singing happily.

All of the people joined in the singing and dancing.

The noise inside the synagogue poured out into the night,

            an undulating, swelling, and receding, thinning and growing sound.

The joy of dancing with the Torah, singing God's words

            clutching the scrolls close to them,

            made them reluctant to end the dance.

All in the synagogue experienced their great joy and love of God.

God takes great delight in us.

He will quiet us with his love.

The Lord our God is with us.

He will rejoice over us with singing.

AMEN