***“With All Joy”*** by S. Finlan, at First Church, December 16, 2018

**Zephaniah 3:16–20**

16On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 17The Lord, your God, is in your midst . . . He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 18as on a day of festival . . . . 19 I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned.

**Luke 3:15–17**

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary.”

**Romans 15:12–14**

12 Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” 13May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

14 I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

We start out with God’s promised joy in the prophet Zephaniah. This is a surprising passage, since it occurs in one of the most pessimistic prophets. For two and a half chapters he’s been reproaching Judah for its corruption. He says “its judges are evening wolves. . . . Its prophets are faithless; its priests have . . . done violence to the law” (Zeph 3:3–4). And he is just as negative about all the neighboring countries. “Ashkelon shall become a desolation”; Moab may engage in taunting, but that land will be “possessed by nettles and salt-pits”; as for the mighty city of Nineveh—“the screech-owl shall lodge on its capitals . . . . It has become a lair for wild animals” (2:4, 8–9, 14–15). He seems to say that everybody is bad, and they’re all coming to a bad end. It’s bad today; and the forecast for tomorrow is . . . *worse*.

Suddenly, halfway through chapter 3, his final chapter, the prophet sees God doing great things for the Jews. In fact, even the Gentiles will all be able to “call on the name of the Lord” (3:9). Then, in a promise directed at Jerusalem, he says God “is in your midst . . . He will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (3:17). Abruptly he shifts to God speaking: “I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise” (3:19).

It is a totally unexpected finale to what *seemed* like it would be the most frightening and threatening book among all the prophets.

There is no explanation for the change. But suddenly God will save the lame, gather the outcast, reverse the shame and weakness, and bring joy where there had been disaster. The turning point seems to be in 3:8, where he has God say “wait for me . . . for the day when I arise as a witness,” and then the promises start flowing. *Why* are the lame and the weak saved? Because God *wills* it. It happens because that is God’s will. So Zephaniah is *not* the most depressing of the prophets. In fact, he confidently announces that God wills what is good, even for the Gentiles.

Now, John the Baptist is a little like Zephaniah, in that he can both threaten judgment and promise a blessing, which, for him, is through the Messiah who is coming. He “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire,” and will “gather the wheat into his granary” (3:16–17). This is apocalyptic. God will intervene into human history with a *fiery* Holy Spirit, and the winnowing of wheat, which refers to judgment.

The Apostle Paul can also balance threat and promise, but in the passage for today, it’s all Promise. The first thing to know is that Jesse is David’s father. Paul gets from Isaiah the promise that a descendant of David will rule over the Gentiles and give them hope (Rom 15:12). That is hopeful for Jews and Gentiles alike. Then he gives us *all* our Advent themes: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). Notice that hope itself is powered by the Spirit.

Paul has confidence that the Roman Christians, to whom he writes, are “full of goodness” (15:14). More than that, Paul says they are “*filled* with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another” (15:14). The Spirit does not rebuke those who have spiritual need, but *answers* their need, *fills* them, and turns them into teachers. The Spirit is not a strict father figure, but a nurturing and helping parental figure.

Now, normal social forces like wealth and health can help you. But spiritual truth does what these cannot do: it lifts up the weak and vulnerable. It strengthens the downtrodden. It saves the lame, and changes their shame. Really, it changes the game! The Spirit changes the mediocre person into a powerhouse of life and joy.

How dangerous and out of control (that is, out of *human* control) is the Holy Spirit! It goes against the perceived laws of life, where the weak get weaker and the strong get stronger. Rather, the Holy Spirit can empower the weak, and cause a twinge of conscience in the strong. The Spirit can reverse someone’s direction in life, get him off drugs or alcohol, or change his life in a hundred other ways.

This *power* of the Spirit is what John is aiming at when he says the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit *and with fire* (Luke 3:16). Spiritual truth is fire in the belly . . . fire in the mind. Or maybe it lights a fire underneath you.

Has it been a while since you’ve felt you were baptized with fire? But *know* that this spiritual fire is always around, and available! If we let all joy and peace flow into us, then we “abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13). Zephaniah would have appreciated hearing this: that it is God’s will that we overflow with evidence of the Spirit. God saves the lame and gathers the outcast—all the many *kinds* of people who can feel outcast. God will change their shame into praise.

The goodness of God, then, is the beginning of the message. After God fills you with joy and power, then you are to go out and share them. Share that fire!