

**St. Lydia's Dinner Church**  
**Advent V // December 5**  
**Christian Scharen**

**A reading from Zephaniah**

3:14 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 I, your God, am in your midst,  
a fighter who gives victory;

I will rejoice over you with gladness,  
I will renew you in my love;

I 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.

Zephaniah, one of the 12 so-called “minor” prophets in the Hebrew Bible, wrote at the same time as Jeremiah. The text we have, a traditional Advent text, is the very end of the book. Let’s pause, first, and look back in Zephaniah to gain context for this concluding section called a ‘song of joy’.

Zephaniah, along with his contemporary, Jeremiah, preached that judgement would fall upon the people of Israel and Judah in the form of God’s wrath. Their apparent offense was idolatry, especially worshipping Canaanite gods and goddesses like Ba’al and Asarte, both related to rain and to fertility, and both originally associated with Yahweh. Interestingly, while Yahweh was worshiped in the Temple, tended by male priests, these Gods were worshiped primarily in the domestic sphere, and were especially revered by women. Women, in fact, as part of the ritual observance, baked little cakes to the Queen of Heaven. While we don’t have records of what the people themselves thought, we do here glimpses of their practice via the condemnations. Jeremiah puts these words in the mouth of the Lord:

7:18 The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.

Zephaniah similarly has the Lord say:

1:4 I will stretch out my hand against Judah,  
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;  
and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal  
and the name of the idolatrous priests;  
5 those who bow down on the roofs  
to the host of the heavens;  
those who bow down and swear to the Lord,  
but also swear by their God.

There is, as Karen Armstrong points out in her book *The History of God*, an evolving divine identity overtime, from a time of polytheism, or at least not strict monotheism, among ancient Near Eastern peoples. Early Yahwehism included feminine aspects, including some evidence that the Queen of Heaven was Yahweh’s consort or lover. I remember first learning this history and being offended, angry at the suppression of belief and especially the domestic feminine with whom I so deeply identify.

So, ever since, when I am making double-crust pies, I cut a moon and stars in the crust as a kind of solidarity with these ancestors in the faith who were, in my view, wrongly accused. Its just one version of an old story of blaming women which the story of Adam and Eve perpetuates. It was a highlight of that era of my theological formation when, at a Minneapolis conference re-imagining Christianity, the presider stood before the altar and slowly ate an apple before then serving milk and honey for the Eucharist.

Yet, this story from Jeremiah and Zephaniah is not only about stamping out polytheism, but stamping out economic oppression, something even more profoundly against the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into a land promised for them. They were, again and again, called to attend to the widow, the orphan, the sojourner, and the poor among them, “for you yourself were once slaves in Egypt.” Clearly, given the text we have before us today, Israel and Judah had developed into a highly stratified society in which kings and their noble courts and their priests feasted and wore fine clothing, while many lived with the boot of empire upon their necks. To them, Zephaniah names God’s promise:

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.

Advent is, I think, a chance to contest and recast the stories that haunt us, that try to define us, and that we all too often allow to define us. It may be that the first example feels closer to your story, that somehow, someone casts a pall over your joyful spaces saying that you are not allowed to have that joy. It may be that the second example feels closer to your story, that you are told that you are somehow responsible for your own suffering, a circumstance you ought to feel shameful about. In both cases, it seems to me, Zephaniah—and Advent—are right. God is about dealing with those toxic stories, about saving us from unnecessary suffering, about changing our stories of shame to stories of our full dignity, our full humanity, our identity as beloved. End of story. Amen.