

3rd Sunday of Advent , Year C, December 16th, 2018

This is Gaudete Sunday, which takes its name from the Latin word for “rejoice.”² We are half way through Advent and the vestments are rose. This passage of hope from Zephaniah is in marked contrast to the rest of his writings, which are words of judgment and doom. This book was written at a time when Jerusalem was full of idolatry, when there were many pagan shrines, even in the courts of the temple. People consulted ghosts and spirits and other evils. In Chapter 1, Zephaniah writes of the Day of the Lord as a Day of Doom. In Chapter 2, he writes of the Day of the Lord as a Day of Judgment. Here in Chapter 3 he looks to the Day after Judgment.

Zephaniah 3:14-18a

14Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! “Daughter Zion,” “Israel,” and “Daughter Jerusalem” all express the same reality: all Israel concentrated in its capital.⁵ (This title, “daughter Zion,” is also used by the Church to refer to Our Lady.)⁶ (CCC 2676) **Sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart,** Israel’s joy is based on God’s joy in verse 17 and on His presence in their midst. There is an old saying that joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.¹ **O daughter** In Exodus 4:22 the parent-child relationship is re-established: “Israel is my son, my first born.” After the exile, Israel is God’s daughter. **Jerusalem!**

15The Lord has removed the judgment against you, C.S. Lewis wrote that suffering is “God’s megaphone.” **he has turned away your enemies;** These enemies were a judgment of the Lord and when he is once again within her, there will be no further misfortune to fear. **the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst,** This is not a typical monarch. The writing prepares the people for the day when God would be present in person. The Lord himself shall stand at the head of Israel’s army. With such leadership the nation need fear no enemy, from within or without.⁴ **you have no further misfortune to fear.**

16On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The message is: Zion must no longer give way to fear or discouragement (in Hebrew, “let not your hands droop”).⁵

17The Lord, your God, is in your midst, It is no longer necessary to lead Israel into the desert to achieve this renewal; it will be done by the Lord in her midst.⁵ **a mighty savior; he** This is God who will rejoice! **will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he** This is God who will sing joyfully! **will sing joyfully because of you,** While the change takes place in the bride, it proceeds from Yahweh’s renewing grace, and therefore the joy of rediscovered love is attributed to Him.⁵

18aas one sings at festivals. Jerusalem’s most important citizen, so to speak, her savior, shall feel toward that city as a bridegroom for his bride, and in coming to the city he shall be attended by gladness and love and joyous shouts.⁴ There are many similarities between this selection and the account of the Annunciation to Mary in Luke 1:26-38: “Rejoice,” “fear not,” “The Lord is in your midst (with you, in your womb). The term which means “in your midst” can also be translated “in your womb.” The Lord is referred to as “King” and “Savior.” Luke made it very clear that the Lord promised in Zephaniah is the Lord announced by Gabriel to Mary.⁵

Philippians 4:4-7

Read this as a prescription for a wonderful Christmas!

Brothers and sisters:

4Rejoice in the Lord always! Bl. Escriva explains that only by offending God do we lose joy because sin is the fruit of selfishness, which is the root of sadness.⁷ **I say it again: rejoice!** The joy of the Lord is produced in believers by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22) and can flourish despite trying circumstances and even crushing misfortunes. Remember that this was written by St. Paul when he was in prison in chains! It reminds us that

we may not be able to control our circumstances, but we can always control our response to those circumstances!¹

5Your kindness should be known to all. Paul wants the Philippians to be a model community. **The Lord is near.** Mindful of the possible nearness of the parousia, the Philippians are not to be overly concerned about their troubles but instead are to resolve them in prayer. Paul is not trying to specify when the Second Coming will take place, but he does not want it to catch them unprepared.⁷

6Have no anxiety at all, Constant dialogue with God in prayer is a good way to prevent anything robbing us of peace of soul for St. Bernard taught that it regulates our affections, directs our actions, corrects our faults, guides our conduct, beautifies and orders our life and it brings with it knowledge of things divine and things human as well.⁷ **but in everything, by prayer** Paul is telling them to turn their troubles into prayers. (There is nothing too great for God's power and nothing too small for his fatherly care.)⁸ In John 14:13 we are told that Christ is glorified by what we ask the Father in his name. **and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.** It was Paul's conviction that every prayer must include thanksgiving. This implies not only gratitude but also submission to God's will.⁸

7Then the peace of God This peace is different from the world's peace. It is not in positive thinking, in absence of conflict, or in good feelings. This is a real peace, and it comes from knowing that God is in control of our life.¹ **that surpasses all understanding** This peace is beyond man's ability to obtain by himself. It is beyond our contriving. It is only a gift of God's giving.⁸ **will guard** Paul uses a military term that means that God's peace will stand like a sentinel on guard upon our hearts and minds.⁸ **your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.** The spiritual life is often compared to physical growth. Just as living organisms grow gradually when they receive the gifts of nourishment like food, water, and rest, the soul of a person grows gradually when it receives the gifts of God's grace. Grace seldom hits a person like a ton of bricks. Usually, one drop of grace at a time enters the soul in the way that one drop at a time of rain penetrates the soil to nourish the root. An occasional decision to pray becomes a habit of prayer and then a life of prayer. Many Christians report that after a few years of regular prayer and simple consideration of the fact that God is always with them, they suddenly became aware of His constant presence and that their prayer to Him had become, for all intents and purposes, constant. They couldn't begin to tell you exactly when they started praying constantly, it just happened slowly under the influence of God's grace.³

Luke 3:10-18

10The crowds This was a motley group of sinners that contained tax collectors and soldiers, Pharisees and Sadducees, and prostitutes.⁶ (CCC 535) **asked John the Baptist, "What should we do?"**

11He said to them in reply, John directs his message to all persons and professions. The spiritual renewal he calls for entails, among other things, a return to social justice, honesty and generosity.⁹ **"Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none.** In Luke 9:3 it says that itinerant missionaries could not have two tunics. The sharing of food and clothing was a basic expression of faith.¹⁰ **And whoever has food should do likewise."** James explains in his letter: "If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day and you say to them, 'Good-bye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed,' but do not meet their bodily needs, what good is that?"

12Even tax collectors These were men who bought from the Romans the right to collect taxes. They were despised by the Jews.⁴ While the religious community treated them with scorn, they form one of the groups who accepted both the prophet John and Jesus.¹⁰ **came to be baptized and they said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"**

13He answered them, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." Surprisingly, John does not tell them to change their occupation, but only to tax justly. The tax collectors are not told to aim for a better career but for

better morals.³ As Bl. Escriva commented, “Any honest and worthwhile work can be converted into a divine occupation. In God’s service there are no second class jobs.”¹¹

¹⁴**Soldiers** These military personnel provided armed support for the tax collectors.⁴ **also asked him, “And what is it that we should do?” He told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”** John preaches against sin and not for the overthrow of the political order. This is very similar to the constant advice of Pope John Paul II: “Be who you are!”³

¹⁵**Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ.** The multitudes wonder if John is the Messiah. He denies this and speaks of the Messiah as one “mightier” than he.⁹

¹⁶**John answered them all** John read their hearts. **saying, “I am baptizing you with water,** The baptism of John was symbolic, expressing the repentance of the sinner but it effected of itself no interior sacramental change.¹² John was fully aware that his disciples must also receive the greater Baptism of the Messiah, which both signifies and effects spiritual cleansing. Only the Christian sacrament frees the soul of sin, gives the soul rebirth as a son of God, makes one a member of Christ, and incorporates one into the Church.⁶ (CCC 1213) **but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.** I am not fit to be his slave. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** This reference is to Pentecost where both Spirit and fire appear in a “baptism in the Spirit” that is contrasted to the baptism of John, which was just with water in Acts 1:5.¹⁰

¹⁷**His winnowing-fan** According to common practice, grain was tossed into the air with a forked shovel. The wind blew away the useless chaff, while the grain kernels fell to the threshing floor to be gathered up and stored. God will similarly separate the righteous and wicked at the final judgment.⁹ **is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**

¹⁸**Exhorting them in many other ways,** This suggests that John’s ministry took place over a period of time and that he was relatively independent of—although surely pointing forward to—the ministry of Jesus. **he preached good news** John’s message, like that of Jesus himself, was good news to those who sought to live according to the will of God. The judgment is no threat to the righteous; in fact, it will be a moment of validation for them and for their way of life, as evil is destroyed and God’s will triumphs.² **to the people.**

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from: (1) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (2) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (3) the Commentary Notes of Tim Grey and Sean Innerst, (4) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (5) “ZEPHANIAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, LAMENTATIONS, OBADIAH” by George T. Montague, S.M., (6) “Catechism Of The Catholic Church,” (7) “The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles,” (8) “The Letters To The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians” by William Barclay, (9) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke,” (10) “The Gospel of Luke” by Luke Timothy Johnson, (11) “The Navarre Bible: St. Luke” and (12) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.