

Natalie W. Bell
 December 15, 2024
 3rd Advent

The Promise of Restoration
Zephaniah 3:14-20

*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 *The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
 a warrior who gives victory;*

*he will **rejoice over you** with gladness;
 he will **renew you in his love;***

*he will **exult over you with loud singing***

¹⁸ *as on a day of festival.”^[d]*

*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.*

Kate Bowler has an interview on youtube, entitled:
How Will We Live In These Beautiful, Terrible Days?

In it, she tells a story of restoration.

She talks about how while walking one day in her neighborhood, on the phone with a friend, she felt a pain in the back of her leg, and it kept getting worse as she walked.

So she finally got off the phone, went home, and showed the spot to her husband, Who immediately knew what it was—a snakebite.

She first went to the urgent care,
but they sent her on to the ER because the spot was growing,
and it was likely a poisonous bite.

When she was in the ER waiting on the anti-venom treatment,
she told the nurse that this was a surreal, full-circle moment for her.
She explained to the nurse that she had spent a lot of time in this ER,
a few years ago, with GI pain.

So the nurse asked what had happened.

Kate said, *well, this is the place that kept sending me home with Pepto-Bismol,
and all the time I had stage 4 cancer.*

That stopped the nurse in her tracks.

She said to Kate: *I am so sorry about what happened to you.*

*What happened to you was wrong,
and on behalf of all of us who work at this hospital, I'm sorry.*

It was a rare moment of restoration for Kate,
And a ***glimpse of the restoration*** of our world someday.

Of course, we don't usually get an apology

for what has happened to us in life, do we?

We want one—we'd like to think that all the people who have hurt us
would apologize, and that all the disasters and tragedies

would somehow say I'm sorry,

And yet—that's not what happens, is it?

We all know what it is to live life wanting wholeness, and restoration.

But all too often restoration is only something that we can hope for,

Not something we actually experience.

The Book of Zephaniah is a collection of prophetic apocalyptic oracles

warning the people of God in the late 7th century BC, after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians, and before the fall of the Southern Kingdom and Jerusalem in 587 BC to Babylon.

It is a time of social and political upheaval for God's people,
and Zephaniah's words are God's warning against the rebellious people.
The book is filled with judgment,
But then it takes a dramatic turn--to joy and rejoicing!

Zephaniah was writing to people who needed to learn about themselves.
They were not perfect.
This prophet called out those who were oppressing others,
Who were taking advantage of their authority.
Those who were turning away from God.

And Zephaniah points out that turning away from God only leads to destruction.
In fact, the Babylonian empire takes God's people into exile,
destroying the temple, and the lives of so many.

Much of the book is about God's judgment.
But—in the middle of the judgment,
Zephaniah makes a U-turn, to joy and rejoicing upon the arrival of God.

This "day of the Lord" is not what people expect.
They expect to see a vengeful God of condemnation and wrath.
Instead, God comes as a Savior—to rescue, protect, love and rejoice!
It's shocking!

And finally, in Chapter 3:19-20, Zephaniah's oracle ends with God's restoration of the people.
A day when the oppressed will be protected, the ashamed will rejoice,
those left out will be brought back into community.

This is what Zephaniah is talking about in vs. 16-20:
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, ... 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.

Imagine what the people hearing that must have felt!
Just like the “weeping prophet” Jeremiah,
 who saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile unfold,
 Zephaniah speaks about the day when God’s promises will be fulfilled.

It’s a word we all need to hear, isn’t it?
 Don’t we want the hope of God’s restoration?
 Of a day when God will make all things right in the world?

I guess if you think everything is fine right now, maybe you don’t hope for that,
 But if you are like most of us,
 Seeing the pain and suffering of this world—
 Well, that vision is awesome!

In her Advent devotional, *A Weary World Rejoices*,
 Kate Bowler says that the more we notice
 the difference between ***WHAT IS and WHAT SHOULD BE***
 our Christmas joy can shrink to the size of a snow globe.

Have YOU ever felt that way?
 That what you ***SEE AND HEAR*** about Christmas joy is not the same
 as what you ***FEEL inside?***

We see the Christmas lights and hear the songs,
 and everything looks bright and shiny,
but inside we are often falling apart!

We read the Christmas cards and ads online,
 where families look put together,
 And people are joyful,
 And everything looks nearly perfect,
But in OUR homes and lives, everything is a mess!

We NEED God’s restoration—don’t we?

But, she says, what if a small Christmas snow globe
is actually a symbol of hope?
 Because in it we catch a glimpse of a restored world, in that globe of pristine snow
 and beauty.

She says what if that's a "*glimpse of a perfected world.....a not-yet-ness that God has promised to see through... God is in the work of restoring it all.*"

When you think about it,
That's what the Advent season—the four weeks before Christmas—is all about.

It's about living in the *in-between times*,
 the *already-not-yet life* we lead as followers of Jesus Christ.

We live between the Jesus who has ***ALREADY come*** in the flesh,
 lived, died, was raised from death.
 But he has ***NOT YET come back***, to make all things right in the world.
 We live in the *already-not-yet time*.

It's also known as a *liminal time*—
 A time of waiting, watching, and hoping.
 It's like the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness,
 between being freed from slavery in Egypt
 and entering the promised land.

It's like the time of the Babylonian exile,
 The nearly 70 years when God's people were away from their homeland,
 Forced to live in a foreign place.
 Years later, they were allowed to return home,
 And rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.
 But those 70 years? Liminal time.

Advent is liminal, like that.
 The good news about liminal time is that it's also a time of ***growth and change.***
We learn a lot in the in-between times of life, don't we?
 We learn a lot ***about ourselves*** when we wait....sometimes not so patiently.
 We learn a lot about ***what we want, what we envision,***
 Even as we think about what the future might hold.

***In the Bible, liminal times are times
 when we are supposed to hold on tight,
 to the promises and the character of God.***
 Because everything else seems like it's missing.
 But God is never missing.

These are the times when we are called to ***join God at work in the world—***
to ***help restore what can be restored on earth, as it is in heaven.***

The vision of restoration in Zephaniah is so powerful because it was ***so NEEDED,***
He was surrounded by pain and suffering and corruption

Think about the pain and suffering in our lives today.

And the oppression, corruption, and evil in our world,

The ***whole world needs restoration—desperately, doesn't it?***

That's what makes the promise of God's restoration so powerful.

It's powerful because we need it so badly!

I wonder, what does restoration mean to YOU?

In your life?

What would it mean for God to bring restoration to you?

And what about in our world?

Where do we need restoration?

What would that look like?

Advent is the season when we wait for God to restore everything and everyone.

That's what it means to wait for Jesus.

Yes, we wait for Christmas, and the birth of Jesus in our hearts once again.

But we also ***watch and wait for the return of Jesus*** to our world.

On that Day we will see for ourselves how God rejoices over us,

Renews us, sings over us.

On that Day we will see how God saves all the lost,

and helps all who are worn down.

How God heals the sick, and takes away all mourning.

It will be like the vision of heaven in Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples

and God himself will be with them and be their God;^[d]

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ *And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”*

One day—all things will be made new, by our Savior Jesus.

Until then, ***we join God’s work*** in this world,
To bring the restoration that is possible today.

Until then, we ***look for the little rays of light and hope*** in our world,
The ***God-sightings*** that show the restoration that is happening, right now.

Today we lit the pink candle—the candle of Joy on the Advent wreath.
This 3rd Sunday of Advent is also known as Joy Sunday,
and on it we hear prophecies of joy, like the Zephaniah passage today.

Listen again to some of it:

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ *The Lord, your God, is in your midst,*

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness;

he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

Just imagine that--- God, rejoicing over YOU!

Renewing YOU with his love?

Singing over YOU?

That is exactly what is promised, all throughout the scriptures.

That is the hope we have today, and always.

And it is a hope that we see glimmers of, even now!

We cannot wait for people to bring that hope.

We do not always get an apology for what has happened to us,

Or an acknowledgment of the pain we’ve experienced.

We do not necessarily see all the restoration we want, on this side of heaven.

But we do see glimpses of it, and little rays of light.

So this Advent, let's look for the light, and restoration.

Let's keep our eyes and ears open to that hope.

And may we be ***instruments of God's light, and hope and restoration,***

In the world all around us.

That is our Good News today.

And with that, all God's people can say together, Amen.