

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The Lord has removed your judgment;
he has turned away your enemy.
The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst;
you will no longer fear evil.

¹⁶ On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem:
Don't fear, Zion.
Don't let your hands fall.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst—a warrior bringing victory.
He will create calm with his love;
he will rejoice over you with singing.

¹⁸ I will remove from you those worried about the appointed feasts.^[d]
They have been a burden for her, a reproach.

¹⁹ Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time.
I will deliver the lame;
I will gather the outcast.

I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth.

²⁰ At that time, I will bring all of you back,
at the time when I gather you.

I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples
when I restore your possessions and you can see them^[e]—says the Lord.

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴ Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks.⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

⁸ From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹ Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸ Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”

¹⁰ The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

¹¹ He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³ He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”

¹⁴ Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?” He answered, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

¹⁵ The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. ¹⁶ John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.” ¹⁸ With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

For the first two weeks of this Advent series, we've focused a lot of time on us and the activity we're called to within Advent. In our first week, we focused on how we anticipate the work of God. Last week, we spoke of how Advent calls us to transformation, not just through the miraculous acts of God, but through our own ordinary, daily work of reshaping the world as God's children. If you'd like to catch up on those themes, they're available on our website.

But today, and really for the rest of our Advent journey, we turn our focus primarily to the work of God, to the kind of work that only God can fully accomplish. We turn toward themes of restoration and redemption. Both terms focus on giving value in some way. Now, though we sometimes seem to use them synonymously, there's an important, though

subtle, difference between these two words. When we talk about restoration, we're speaking about making things as they once were, about restoring things to their rightful place in the world. Think about restoring an antique piece of furniture or a historical home. You're trying to bring out the original glory of the piece, or the initial beauty and use of the home. Restoration is an act of preservation that draws on the original form of things. On the other hand, redemption is about valuing things in a new way, about transferring the value of one thing for another. Rather than look to the past, redemption gives a new purpose and turns us toward the future. So, fittingly, today we'll explore Advent's restoration of creation, and next week we'll explore Advent's redemption of humanity.

Today's reading from Zephaniah is teeming with themes of restoration. We hear of a promised time when the Lord, "will create calm with his love," that God "will change

their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth," will "bring all of you back" home and "restore your possessions." It helps to remember that Zephaniah prophesied after the Northern Kingdom of Israel, also known as Ephraim, fell to Assyrian conquerors. The once powerful nation of God's chosen people had split centuries before, and the northern portion, the much more significant in landmass, had been conquered recently and now belonged to a foreign occupying force. Zephaniah prophesied in Jerusalem, in the smaller Southern Kingdom of Israel, also known as Judah, during the time of King Josiah. Josiah was the last truly faithful king before the Judah, the Southern Kingdom, fell to the Babylonian Empire soon after his death.

Now, if you didn't quite follow that Spark Notes version of Israel's history, just know this. Zephaniah lived at a time of great tension. Things seemed better under the strong, faithful leadership of Josiah, but honestly, things were still a

far cry from the glory of David and Solomon's kingdom, the heights of the golden days of Israel. What was left of Israel was a smaller, poorer, weaker country under threat of Babylonian armies. Zephaniah prophesied not just for deliverance from the immediate trouble, but for a restoration of God's promise, of the Messiah who would return the fullness of God's favor to God's people. That's why we hear things like a promise to "bring all of you back," for so many of their family and friends already live in exile. That's why we hear language like a promise "restore your possessions," because the once prosperous nation now struggles. That's why we hear language like a promise to "change your shame into praise," for this once proud nation may one day be proud again because of the work of restoration God may do amongst them.

Now, we must take care about the kind of restoration we seek. We may equate ourselves with Israel and just hope

for our own glory days. We may think that we want God to restore us to a certain period of history, but that kind of thinking is almost always flawed by our own narrow perspective. For instance, I hear many people talk about the 1950's as the good old days, the golden years, wishing that we could be back there. Yet, if we listen closely, that's usually white people, because the segregation of the 1950's and the violence done to black people during that decade makes it a time of terrible memory for people of color.

And more often than not, it's wealthy white men, because the amount of sexism and repression created demeaning a demeaning society for women who wanted independence, to work in the same jobs and for the same pay as men, if they were allowed to work at all, where Don Draper's Mad Men was not TV escapism, but real life experience. Now, there were great things about the 50's, don't get me wrong, but the problem with seeking

restoration to the time that we want the most is that, often, that time was good for us because it was so bad for someone else. The kind of restoration God promises is one we might experience equally, where we might all find life abundant, not excluding any but instead embracing one another equally as the image of God. It's not a restoration to a time we created, but to the time God created, to a taste of Eden.

What might restoration look like for us? As a congregation, we're experiencing restoration as we grow in numbers, in outreach, in ability to do ministry here in the New River Valley, which is an Advent blessing for which we give thanks. Even our ability to rehabilitate the spaces we have to increase accessibility, inclusion, and welcome. We're finding our way, trying to experience God's restoration in a way that benefits everyone. Yet, the kind of restoration that God promises extends far beyond the walls

of the church. Just like Eden, Advent's restoration is not just for us, but for all creation.

Restoration looks like Eden, a return to God's garden before the fall into sin and the consequences that brought into our world. Advent is about the whole earth looking for a return to this time where there was enough food for all, enough land for all, enough resources for all, enough love for all, just enough of everything. In the words of Zephaniah, a time is coming when God will "create calm with his love." That's the kind of restoration we're promised, a calm, based in God's love, experienced through God's satisfying of every need with enough of everything for everyone.

Restoration looks like a world where the pain of lies and deceit and selfishness no longer afflict our relationships. Where the beauty of enough between Adam and Eve carried them as they walked with God together, in the garden in the cool of the day. Where the calm of love

showered over every person and inspired compassion, care, and concern for one another. When greed and envy and spite no longer divide us, but instead the image of God unites us. That's the restoration we hope for in Advent.

Restoration looks like a healthy, vibrant environment, no longer plagued by overfishing or oil spills or garbage strewn across the landscape or emissions chocking the life out of plants and animals. Where instead all of God's creatures thrive as mutual members of creation. Where whales swim free and coral grows strong. Where elephants roam without fear of poachers and waters flow free of pacific gyres or fossil fuels. Where forest no longer face clear cutting and mountains no longer suffer strip mining. Where humanity lives in symbiotic harmony with the creation we're called to watch over as the caretakers of God's garden. That's the restoration creation hopes for in Advent.

Restoration looks like a world that knows her Creator, that loves her Lord, that meets her maker in the best possible way. In Eden, there was nothing separating humanity from God, nothing between Creator and creation except love. Though sin eventually entered the equation and blinded us toward God's goodness, in Eden we find a place where sin had no place. Advent promises a time where that once again is the reality that defines us, no longer the effects of sin and only the affection of God. Where no longer will our faults or failures prevent us from coming to God, because God will once again come to us.

That's what we wait for in the manger of Bethlehem, when the fullness of Eden returns to us in a manger. The decisions of Adam and Eve led to a separation between God and humanity. But the willingness of Mary to carry Jesus into the world, and the willingness of God to become human through Mary in Jesus, overcome that sin and

restore us to right relationship, resetting humanity as beloved creations of the creator. Jesus is the restoration of Eden for us, for the church, and for all creation. This third Sunday in Advent has often been called Joy Sunday, the day where where our hearts leap at the thought of Christ's coming. The restoration of Eden is surely a reason for joy. Amen.

Restoration, about making things as they once were, an Eden trajectory

Redemption, about valuing things in a new way, a kingdom trajectory

Weekly Themes

Week 1 – Anticipation (Waiting with Purpose – Jeremiah 33)

Week 2 – Transformation (Anticipating Change – Malachi 3)

Week 3 – Restoration (Transformation to God's Purposes – Zephaniah 3)

Week 4 – Redemption (Restoration to Value – Micah 5)