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Advent Devotional "Reason to Sing"

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Advent Devotional
December 17, 2012
Reason to Sing
Zephaniah 3:14-20

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange place?” the Psalmist asked (Psalm 137:4), and we often find ourselves sighing in agreement as we read. Successive transportation revolutions have made our society highly mobile. Children no longer necessarily live out their lives near parents and grandparents. My father lived his life, with brief military and educational excursions away, in the same state; that was not unusual for his generation. Each time we moved, Ronnie and I got further from where we grew up, ending up two states away from our point of origin; that was not unusual for our generation. Members of our Sunday School class have family living on both coasts and from Texas to Canada; visiting children often involves air travel. We live in a town of two colleges which draw students from around the world. All of us have lived in strange places, removed from where we grew up. Singing the Lord’s songs in a strange place is nothing new to us as individuals or as a congregation.

But all of us have visited strange places that have nothing to do with the rivers of Babylon and their willows—or with any other place on earth. Too often, in the most familiar of places, in the midst of family or friends, of the most beloved, we still find ourselves in a strange place. We find ourselves weighed down with care, with guilt, with depression even when all around us celebrate. Our world grays out though the world of

those around us shines with vibrant colors. Zephaniah speaks to those who inhabit that world, the world of care, guilt, and depression suffered by sinners who lack any understanding, or perhaps merely any acceptance, of divine forgiveness. It is a land of fear, anxiety, and dejection, a land where one only wants to sit and not move. It is a strange land that we've all visited.

Zephaniah promises, on God's behalf, a restored world, a world of forgiveness and redemption, a world where a mighty, victorious warrior defeats all enemies, all oppressors, and renews the careworn with his love. He saves the lame and outcast, those unable to save themselves from the world's rigors, and turns shame to praise and renown. He gathers the scattered, gives them space together, and restores their fortunes.

As a child, I went to the movies every week to see the most recent installment of western serials that graced the screen. It was a world of "meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch, meanwhile-back-at-the-pass" danger and suspense, a world of cliff-hanger endings, a world of fair damsels tied to railroad tracks by black-hearted knaves, a world of obvious good beset by obvious evil. Good guys wore white hats, bad guys wore black. Well, most of the time; Zorro and the Lone Ranger were among the exceptions. But it was also a predictable world where good won out despite adversity. Just in the nick of time the hero or the cavalry would arrive and all would be well.

I outgrew that simplistic world as I became more aware of real-world complexities, but the longing for that earlier certainty remained ingrained in my psyche. Zephaniah promises the return to that certainty of care

and salvation. In the argot of my youth, God assumes the role of hero or cavalry. God enables us, as a friend is fond of saying, to “give up guilt for Lent,” but also for all time. Our sin may be ever before us, but God offers forgiveness. He can, if we accept the offer, “turn our gray skies blue.”

No wonder Zephaniah sounds the trumpet call to rejoice! No wonder he tells us to “shout for joy,” “shout in triumph,” “rejoice and exult with all your heart”! We’ve been redeemed! God rejoices over us! God rejoices with us! How can we keep from singing?

Ray Granada