

*Zephaniah 3:14-20 (The Message)*

So sing, Daughter Zion!  
 Raise the rafters, Israel!  
 Daughter Jerusalem,  
 be happy! celebrate!  
 GOD has reversed his judgments  
 against you  
 and sent your enemies off  
 chasing their tails.  
 From now on, GOD is Israel's king,  
 in charge at the center.  
 There's nothing to fear  
 from evil ever again!

Jerusalem will be told:  
 "Don't be afraid.  
 Dear Zion,  
 don't despair.  
 Your GOD is present among you,  
 a strong Warrior there to save you.  
 Happy to have you back,  
 he'll calm you with his love  
 and delight you with his songs.

"The accumulated sorrows  
 of your exile will dissipate.  
 I, your God, will get rid of them for you.  
 You've carried those burdens  
 long enough.  
 At the same time, I'll get rid of all those  
 who've made your life miserable.  
 I'll heal the maimed;  
 I'll bring home the homeless.  
 In the very countries where  
 they were hated  
 they will be venerated.  
 On Judgment Day  
 I'll bring you back home—  
 a great family gathering!  
 You'll be famous and honored  
 all over the world.  
 You'll see it with your own eyes—  
 all those painful partings  
 turned into reunions!"  
 God's Promise.

*Revelation 7:9-12 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying,  
 "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

<sup>11</sup>And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup>singing,  
 "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
 and thanksgiving and honor and power and might  
 be to our God forever and ever!  
 Amen."

*Christmas Day is nearly upon us. Today we lift up the One who is our joy and the hope of the world. We gather to worship Christ, our Lord, our God forever and ever.*

Every year we hear the same question: "How do we put the Christ back in Christmas?" It is an understandable question. Much of the Christmas/Holiday season has nothing to do with Jesus. But this is not a new problem. This has been a problem since the Christians began celebrating Christ's birth around the year 300 AD. Indeed, the crowding out of Jesus has gotten so bad at times that some Christians got rid of the holiday altogether. The Puritans outlawed "Christmas"! Charles Dickens, by way of his tale about Scrooge, probably did more than anyone to resurrect Christmas and shape it into the holiday we have now. So, I guess the message here is that we will always be striving to restore the proper focus at Christmas, to recover what we fear we have lost.

The prophet Zephaniah faced a similar problem in Jerusalem more than 600 years before Jesus. God's people had lost their way, allowing all the problems and opportunities of their lives to crowd out God. They had even "lost" the books of the

### Zephaniah and Advent

In her commentary on Zephaniah (part of the *Interpretation* series), Elizabeth Achtemeier, reflected on the place of today's Zephaniah reading as an Advent Scripture. Here is what she had to say (I've edited it a bit):

As C.H. Spurgeon, who had a way of getting inside the word of God, said in a sermon,

The fulfillment of a divine promise is not the exhaustion of it. When a man gives you a promise, and he keeps it, there is an end of the promise; but it is not so with God. When he keeps His word to the full, He has but begun. He is prepared to keep it, and keep it, and keep it forever and ever ("A Sermon for the Time Present," p. 733).

Thus, the word comes to us also, ever afresh, and applies to us.

In an Advent sermon, Lutheran Larry A. Hoffsis saw the promises of Zephaniah 3:14-20 fulfilled in Christ: the King of Israel, present in our midst (v. 17a), as we gather around his table; God's judgments removed (v. 18a) by the peace with God offered in the outstretched and nail-printed hands of our Lord; our enemies cast out (v. 18b) at the empty tomb and the last enemy, death, destroyed; our hands and hearts strengthened (v. 16c) and made courageous down through the centuries by Christ's abiding presence; the church caught up in the song of victory (v. 14) by the "angels, archangels and all the company of heaven." But Hoffsis added that future note always present in these promises of God that he keeps and keeps and keeps until his Kingdom comes:

The prophet's words are fulfilled in Christ. Even so, there remains for us, too, the element of the future about them. Certainly all is not past in Christ. He points us to his coming again. He is in our midst now, of that we can be assured. But there is a nearer presence still to come, when we shall have our final homecoming with God. That will be a greater celebration ... a higher festival than when the prodigal returned (pp. 30-31).

The church can run its race, knowing that joy is set before it.

Law. To make it worse, they weren't even looking for them; it is as if they didn't even know what they had lost. When Zephaniah stepped onto the scene, there was so much to be recovered and restored. (See the p. 4 textbox for more on King Josiah, Zephaniah's contemporary, and the recovery of the law).

Zephaniah had royal blood flowing in his veins, a direct descendent of the great Hezekiah, King of Judah. Zephaniah knew what had been lost and brought God's message to the people that their latest abandonment of God would have dire consequences. But, like the other OT prophets, Zephaniah brought a message of hope, a promise from God of a future more glorious than anyone could imagine.

We began this Advent series talking about the times when we are scared and we end it with God's words of assurance: "Don't be afraid . . . don't despair. Your God is present among you, a strong warrior there to save you. . . . You've carried those burdens long enough . . . God's promise" (from Zeph. 3:14-20)

Last week, we embraced the unexpected way that God kept this promise. God's Messiah, even God himself, born to a young woman from Nazareth. Mary's baby, the Christ-child, is the promise kept. We focused last week on this astonishing claim that Jesus, choosing not to exploit his "Godness," emptied himself, humbled himself, and was faithful even to death.

Today, we lift up the Christ-child as the one we worship, the Lamb of God who is worthy to receive every bit of adoration, praise, and thanksgiving that we can muster.

### *True worship*

Worshiping as a gathered community is foundational to all things Christians. Further, leading a worshipful life lies at the heart of our discipleship. Such a life is all-encompassing, touching every part of our everyday life. It is experiencing the reality of God

every day, letting God's presence invade us in all moments so that we may become more like the one we worship. It is waking with a word of praise for being given another day. It is giving thanks to God for each meal. It is a kindness performed for another. It is time spent with Scripture each day so that we can come to know better the one we worship. It is time spent in prayer, pouring out our hearts to the one we worship. It is caring for our neighbor. It is giving ourselves, our time, and our money to God's service.

### The "Great Multitude"

Like most passages from Revelation, today's raises many questions among Christians. Who are the "great multitude" of verse 9? And if you look back a few verses before you find the "144,000" who are sealed (marked as God's). Who are they and why are there seemingly so few?

The interpretive key here is found in chapter 5. There John wonders whether anyone will be found who is worthy to open the scroll. One of the twenty-four elders gathered around the throne tells John of the Lion of Judah. But when John turns to look, he sees the Lamb. John *hears* about a lion, but sees a lamb. Jesus is both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God.

The same sequence is found in chapter 7. John *hears* the number of the 144,000 (12,000 from each of Israel's twelve tribes) but sees a "great multitude." *Hears* and then *sees*. The great multitude is robed in white, made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are also waving palm branches (yes, think Palm Sunday).

Just as Jesus is both lion and lamb, the 144,000 and the great multitude are one and the same – all those who belong to God; i.e., those who have faith in Jesus Christ. John both *hears* and *sees*.

We don't really have to make it more complicated than this, though Christians keep trying. John skillfully brings together what you and I would call Old Testament and New Testament imagery to dramatically illustrate that even in the midst of a world turned against God, his people, stretching back to Abraham and forward to the end, stand united in their commitment to and worship of the one true God – forever and ever.

But today's passage from Revelation draws our attention to the purposeful worship of all those who love the Lord. In John's vision it is not only the people of God (the 144,000/great multitude) who worship, but the angels and the elders and the four living creatures who fall on their faces before God.

The worship scenes in Revelation place God, here in the person of the Lamb of God, at the very center. There is no reservation on the part of the worshipers, no caution, no concern for themselves – all is focused on the worship of the Lamb. J. Wilbur Chapman told a story about Queen Victoria which underscores this point:

When Queen Victoria had just ascended her throne she went, as is the custom of Royalty, to hear "The Messiah" rendered. She had been instructed as to her conduct by those who knew, and was told that she must not rise when the others stood at the singing of the Hallelujah Chorus. When that magnificent chorus was being sung and the singers were shouting "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth," she sat with great difficulty.

It seemed as if she would rise in spite of the custom of kings and queens, but finally when they came to that part of the chorus where with a shout they proclaim Him King of Kings suddenly the young queen rose and stood with bowed head, as if she would take her own crown from off her head and cast it at His feet.<sup>1</sup>

Queen Victoria "got it." How could we do less? Advent is a call to prepare ourselves for the arrival of the Christ-child. Are we truly ready to cast our own crowns, whatever they may be, before the tiny feet of this baby? It is God whom Mary carries. It is God who will grow up in her home. It is God who gives his life so that we may be fully God's. Merry Christmas indeed.

<sup>1</sup>Tan, P. L. (1996, c1979). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations: A treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers*. Garland TX: Bible Communications.

## King Josiah and the Recovery of the Law

The history of the ancient Israelite kingdoms is marked by a seemingly endless stream of bad kings, one after another taking the people away from God. There were a few bright lights in the royal families, but not many. The last century before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was no different. King Manasseh of Judah (686-641 BC) embodied all that could go right and go wrong. His early years on the throne were an abomination to God, as he led the people to other gods. But imprisonment by the Assyrians brought genuine repentance to Manasseh, who, after returning to Jerusalem, tore down all the image of other gods and the altars used to worship them. Manasseh was succeeded by his son, Amon, whose short reign mirrored the terrible days of Manasseh's early years. After Amon's assassination, his son, Josiah, took the throne though he was only eight!

The Chronicler tells us that Josiah reigned thirty-one years (639-609 BC). As the Chronicler writes, "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left" (2 Chronicles 34:2). When Josiah was sixteen, we are told he began to seek God. When he was twenty he purged the kingdom of all the altars, tents, images, and so on that were used for the worship of foreign gods and he ordered the execution of the idolatrous priests. When Josiah was twenty-six, he led the people in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Everyone in the kingdom contributed wealth to this project and "the people did the work faithfully."

In the course of the reconstruction, the workers made a staggering discovery. They found a copy of "the book of the law of the LORD given to Moses," perhaps Deuteronomy. It isn't the discovery of the book that staggers me, it is the fact that they had lost it in the first place. When he learns of the book's recovery, Josiah tears his clothes in anguish and dismay for he knew that the people had not been keeping the covenant with God.

First, Josiah sends the scrolls to a prophet, Huldah, to confirm that they are actually the books of the law. Then, after confirmation, King Josiah calls all the people to the temple, where he reads to them the entire "book of the covenant." After the reading is finished, Josiah pledges himself to a life of obedience to God and the covenant, and he makes the people do the same.

When Josiah went seeking God at the young age of sixteen, he could not have imagined that God would reveal himself to Josiah in this way, through the discovery of the long lost Torah. In the coming centuries, as the Jews were battered and torn by one oppressor after another, commitment to the collection, composition, editing, and copying of the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets became a prominent part of Judaism. And after the final destruction of the second temple in 70AD, Judaism became a religion built around the reading and study of these writings.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's Scripture passage is centered upon a dramatic worship scene. What do you think constitutes the worship of God? Is it more than what happens in a worship service? If so, how would you describe it to someone? Why do you think that so many Christians fail to make worship attendance a priority? What do you think draws so many to worship on Christmas Eve? Just tradition . . . or it is more?
2. In what types of worship services have you participated? How would you describe them? How did they differ? What did they have in common? Which components of a worship service are most meaningful to you? What might this worship scene from Revelation have to say about our worship practices? Among the elders, the cherubim, the angels, and all the creatures of the cosmos, where would you find your place? What are your roles and responsibilities in the worship of God?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Revelation 4</b> The first part of John's vision to the throne room of God</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Revelation 5</b> The worship of the Lamb</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Revelation 7: 13-17</b> The people of God worship the Lamb</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Revelation 19:1-10</b> The worship scene just before Jesus' triumphal battle. Why are there so many worship scenes in Revelation? What do they have in common?</p>
<p><b>Friday, Numbers 24:17; Revelation 22:16-17</b> Jesus, the bright morning star.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

