

Sermon on **Zephaniah 2:3 and 3:11-13** for 4th Sunday of
Epiphany
St. Paul's Lutheran – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

“Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger... On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from you your arrogant boasters. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD. They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.”

I never liked getting spankings when I was younger. I remember my grandma Boldt giving me a “putchie” on my hand when I took four olives instead of the allotted three. That hurt my heart. But I learned. Spankings from mom turned into more severe and deserved spankings from dad. Now in adulthood it's called “accountability.” When encouraging help is met with apathy or failure, it turns into things that feel more like spankings to the ego, the heart, the self-esteem. I know I've needed them, but I haven't liked them. God knows the sinful messes we are and he allows spankings, discipline, even punishment to come. Why? Because he loves us. He wants us to learn. He doesn't want to lose us eternally. He leads us to seek Him and see:

**In Christ you are truly blessed.
He's the powerful King for the powerless.
He's brings peace when all seems pointless.**

The people of Judah, God's people, had pushed the Lord over the edge. We've tested the Lord's patience in our lives for sure. Some kicked God to the curb and followed false gods. They actively pursued sin and sinful lifestyles and idolatry – even worshipping at the Baal altars. Some came to temple sacrifices, but were divided in their hearts. They swore by God,

but also swore by Molech – an awful pagan idol. Some believed it made no difference thinking God's not going to do anything – good or bad.

That's what they sought. What do you seek? I don't bow down to Baal, but I sure give a lot of time, worry, and money to selfish pursuits ...not *humility*. In some areas I'm in danger of acting and thinking like the world rather than as a child of God... not *righteousness*. Do we seek to put our trust in a few different buckets – trusting my own strength, my own savings, my own abilities and plans rather than my Savior God and seeing myself as just a steward of these gifts to me? Maybe it can only be seen in my heart. The temptation is real. Do I run through the motions because that's what you do – and instead of joy, peace, and praise in my heart there is resentment, indifference, apathy even as we all sit here in God's house? The temptation is real.

He exposes us and our need. Thank the LORD he does. He draws us, *“Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger.”* One can try to fake humility, but true humility always only overflows from the heart. What makes us humble? It is understanding how bad it is with us and how dark and alone God should leave us. Sometimes we need the Babylonians to come and take everything from us to see that without God you have nothing, but if you have Him you have everything; we “lack nothing.” You and I are sinners caught up too often in temptation's traps. God brings us to seek him.

Yet, you are told that you are going to heaven. Why are you, a sinner, able to say that you are going to heaven? Now how you answer shows if you have been humbled or not. If your answer starts with I – “I hope I've been good enough,” or “I think I've been a good person,” you fail. You aren't good enough, nor a good person compared with the one you have to compare yourself with - our holy God! There is only one answer that works. Why are you going to heaven? Jesus. Why are you forgiven? Jesus. Nothing in you, or that you decided, or did. God has brought you, the powerless, and “*humble*,” to “*seek the LORD*.” Seek shelter.

“Perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger.” To be sheltered – what a phrase! You are exposed in the storm with nowhere to hide from the coming danger, wrath, disaster, but you are pulled into somewhere safe and it all goes past never touching you. What can shelter us from the wrath and anger of God we deserve? Where is the God storm shelter? In Egypt, after 9 plagues where Pharaoh said, “No, No, No, God’s people can’t go,” God saved one plague for last – the plague of the firstborn. God would kill the firstborn son and cattle of each home – a judgment on the people and on Pharaoh. But God said to his people that if they slaughtered a year-old perfect lamb or goat and took the blood and put it on the outside door frame of the house they would be sheltered from his wrath. They roasted the meat, ate it, and went into the house. That night the only thing that kept those people safe from God’s wrath was the blood of the lamb that was slain. God’s wrath passed over those houses with the blood. Were the people more worthy than others? No. The blood made the difference. So it is with us. The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, shed on the cross purifies us from every sin and makes us worthy to stand before our God. Jesus bore the punishment of our sin on the cross so God’s wrath, his anger, his justice, passes over us. He shelters us. He rose to prove it. **In Christ you are truly blessed. The powerful King saves the powerless.** He is your shelter.

He brings peace when all seems pointless. *“On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame for all the wrongs you have done to me, because I will remove from you your arrogant boasters. Never again will you be haughty on my holy hill. But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD. They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.”*

Without Christ one can only hope for making this life as peaceable, comfortable and fun as one can. But this is a mirage. A wise man once said “earth is the closest to heaven an unbeliever will get, and earth is the closest to hell a believer will get.” We live in an unsettled world, rarely at peace, with people

of all different opinions and rants and anxieties. While we have tremendous blessings in this life, it clearly is not heaven. Even this prophecy about Jerusalem would never be fully realized even after the physical temple was rebuilt. It was destroyed again. It is only fully realized in the one who brings peace as he rules now in our hearts and forever in eternity – Jesus Christ and the true church of all believers in him. He has taken away our *shame* now, and he has *humbled* us to trust him as our only Savior. *We trust in the name of the LORD.* In heaven we will experience the total absence of sin, lies, deceitful tongues, but even now we strive for this.

Because we are saved, we love to live for the one who saved us. His justification of us where God declared us “not guilty” and took away our shame nailing it to the cross of Christ, now leads to his sanctification of us – his setting us apart for himself as his special holy possession. He gives you the Holy Spirit who creates your new heart to battle your sinful flesh. We don’t lie to try to dodge responsibility, tax or trial. We speak the truth in love. We repent, confess, come to God for forgiveness. We love him and want to be in line with his will, because His perfect will saved us.

“They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.” Once despised and done for, you are now forgiven by his grace, set apart as his own, with eternal life as your inheritance. His love for us drives out fear, even when storms surround us. This promise of God strengthens us. This peace makes us *eat and lie down* like a sheep that can finally rest. “You set a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Ps.23). We can live without fear. And when foxes of fear come to annoy and the wolves of worry fog up our vision, we need only seek Christ our Savior to find the solution and live for him. **In Christ you are truly blessed. The powerful King saves the powerless. You have peace in him even when all seems pointless.** Amen.