

Why We Sing

A Day is coming

Throughout our lives, certain days stand out as very special. These days become special only by careful preparation and seemingly endless rehearsals. We clean house, deck the halls, practice our lines, put up the lights. And we sing. The prophet Zephaniah foresees a great and glorious day – *the day of the LORD*. But what we find in this short and often neglected OT book is a prophet's bold attack on idol worship in ancient Judah. Zephaniah is definitely a wake-up call. Before this day, the Lord will purify his people. They need to be *ready*. It's time to clean-house *spiritually*. Historically, the "cleaning day" would come in the form of a terrible destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Ever notice you can't clean house without first making a big mess? Nevertheless, Zephaniah bears a message of hope: when the cleaning is done, the DAY would come, and when it does, *all heaven will sing*. God and his angels will burst into glorious song!

And the Gospels tell us that on the day Jesus was born, the angels sang. And now, we are waiting for him to come again. How do we feel about that? What would we welcome in his coming? What would we fear the most? Are we ready? This is where the ancient prophets still speak to our lives today. After centuries, their message is still totally relevant to our world. The prophets remind us *why we sing*.

Today as world leaders meet in Copenhagen to discuss the looming catastrophe of climate change, it will be all about the *facts*. Various groups will argue about the *science* of it, dispute the statistics, baulk at the enormous cost of solving the problem. But in Copenhagen, it's all about the *facts*. Nothing will be said there about *faith*. That's because for three hundred years the Western world, has operated out of the world-view that sees the universe as purely the product of random, chance, a universe governed by the fixed laws of physics and therefore a universe one can and *must* seek to understand without resorting to the idea of God or a guiding hand or a Creator. And sure, our minds must be free from the often oppressive grip of religion. But according to this modern world-view, is there not to be found in *this* universe any inspiring purpose for neither sun, moon, stars nor earth, nor we who live here. Beliefs about God and the values that flow from them, must be kept, they would tell us, strictly in realm of . . .

Private faith

In the mainstream of contemporary Western society, the idea that a Sovereign God might rule the universe. . . Well, that may be what *some* people believe, and they're perfectly free to express that belief – *privately* in churches, synagogues and mosques. But in the *public* sphere, at the Copenhagen World Climate Conference for just one example, one would be laughed out of the hall if one should ever stand up and even *suggest* that there might be a role for *God* in solving the problems of this world. So is there any wonder that there is such a heavy atmosphere of pessimism around such a gathering? So little hope for the world's future? So little agreement on what might be done? The gathering seems doomed from the outset. No, in Copenhagen today, nobody is *singing*.

But if we listen in on a little gathering around the prophet Zephaniah, who, even though he warns them of a certain and looming catastrophe, if we listen carefully, even today, across all the centuries, strangely enough we can hear . . .

The Sound of Music

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

Now that's *weird, isn't it?* This is the city to which the prophet has just issued the direst of warnings. A day of reckoning is fast approaching and many there are totally unprepared. Here is a city which in an abundance of material prosperity has created for itself an illusion of invincibility; but in the foreseeable future they will stand to lose their homes, their vineyards, all their hoarded wealth, some of them even their lives.

So *who* is singing in Zion? And, more importantly *why*? The answer is the *people of faith*, who even in the face of a looming crisis see beyond their present circumstance to the . . .

Coming of God into our world

Verse 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. . ."

Did you catch the significance of those last few words? God would be among them. What the prophet could never have known at the time, we know to be absolutely true. Jesus, God's Son came to be among us on earth and to *be* for us and do *for us* what God alone could be and do. He would *take away the judgments* of sin, overcome our enemies. We sing today because God was never more *with* us than he was in Christ on the cross. Christ would rise victorious from the tomb, ascend to heaven to reign as king. Today we have heard the story of his birth. God intervening directly, personally into our world. It is a story so unique, it's a game-changer. This story of Jesus Christ is so profound that it can become the lens through which we view all of life. It is through the lens of *God coming to be among us* that we must understand the witness of the prophet.

Verse 17 "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a *warrior* who gives *victory*."

"Warrior" is a very hard image of God to reconcile with the tiny baby in the manger. It is also a hard statement to reconcile with the statement that God is *Love*. But we must realize that this promise that God would come to us as a *warrior* was given to people who were totally defenseless and had no weapons of their own, and for whom God was their only hope. God is powerful enough to be always and ever *faithful*. And those who believe this will know God as *Father*. For next, in Zephaniah is one of the most intimate portraits of God's in the Bible. Suddenly the mighty warrior lays down his arms and becomes the rejoicing Father. And. . .

"he will rejoice over *you* with gladness, he will renew *you* in his love; he will exult over *you* with loud *singing* as on a day of festival. God is ready to party!

While angels sang to shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem, God himself in heaven *sang* for joy. Why? Because this miraculous birth, the coming of Jesus to earth marks the start of

The New Age of the Kingdom

Verse 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."

Jesus, most clearly in the sermon on the mount, described his kingdom as a great reversal of fortunes on earth in which the poorest and least fortunate are actually the most blessed of all.

Today, in the rich, developed world, science and technology have delivered to us improved health, abundant food, nice cars, warm homes, all the things that can subtly convince those who possess them that they must be on the right path *spiritually*. "We are," as they say, "*so*

blessed! Surely our *might* must somehow be the proof that we are *right*.

There is presently in our world a system firmly in place in which a few have most of the power and wealth while many, many have next to nothing. Voices on the fringe, in the developing world are often ignored even when they bear a vibrant Christian witness. For in the present world order, money talks.

But what the biblical prophets reveal about God is his *justice*. They allow us to see the BIG PICTURE. That's so important because prosperous people, the holders of power and might, eventually and unavoidably find it hard to see outside the bubble of their own affluence to see how their wealth is contributing to the impoverishment of others. It's harder to hear God's warnings in times of prosperity because we are satisfied in our comforts.

Yet there are cracks appearing in the present world order: crushing debt of poorer nations, nuclear weapons in the hands of unstable regimes, climate change threatening those parts of the world least able to cope with its consequences. It seems our world can't go on like this.

So why are we singing today? We're singing so that this world will know there IS

Hope

Verse 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 . . .

In the life of biblical Israel we trace a clear pattern that continues throughout human history, one that could be described as the five "R's": rebellion, then ruin, repentance, then restoration and finally *rejoicing*. Israel went through this cycle many times. And we may ask at which of these five stages do we find *our* society today? If *joy* is the most accurate gauge of spiritual health, if *rejoicing* is the only safe place in the cycle, then we must always ask how genuine is our experience of God today?

So again, it is a question of why we sing.

Good King Wensleslas found his joy in sharing his good fortune with the poorest of the poor. Christmas joy is not that hard to find. It's found when our giving extends not only to our family and close friends, but out to the wider world. Our giving should have a wide-ranging global impact on- "all the peoples of the earth." It should literally be "joy to the *world*." For if we share of our blessings, both material and spiritual, with a needy world, then they will know why we are singing.

And they will sing too.