



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Advent 3 – Year C**  
**December 16, 2018**

**RCL: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18**

### **Zephaniah 3:14-20**

At the heart of this passage is Zephaniah's exultation in God's drawing near to his people. Zephaniah cannot help but proclaim God's character with all his poetic skill as he calls for us to join him in rejoicing. Let us then join with him in extolling the God who loved us so fiercely that he drew nigh to us, and who took on human flesh—the God who took up a cross so that fallen human nature could have victory over its oppressors and spiritual foes, and the God whose grace-filled humanity overflowed to us for the forgiveness of our sins and strengthening of our weak hands against all temptation! Let us praise and delight in the God who rejoices over his redeemed people with gladness, who renews us in his love, who exults over us with loud singing as on a day of festival! And let us take up his heart for the lame and the outcast and the needy of the earth as we rejoice in our hope of finally seeing him face to face, “when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.” Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

- Have you ever imagined God (or specifically Jesus) as a triumphant warrior rejoicing over you as spoils of battle? How comfortable are you with this image?
- Are there any people or groups of people in your neighborhood, town, or city that you sense God longs to save and gather into his Church? How do you sense that God might want to use you and your church to show these people his powerful, redemptive love?

### **Canticle 9**

The Prophet Isaiah has often been called “the fifth evangelist,” and this passage certainly gives us some sense of his evangelistic fervor. Our steadfast faith in the God who saves us is the victory that overcomes the world and all our fears. This is the faith that manifests itself by drawing water from the springs of salvation that Jesus has given us, the waters of baptism. Now Jesus has promised us that whenever we gather in his name, he will be in the midst of us—and this “great one in the midst of us is the Holy One of Israel.” Therefore let us make his deeds known among the peoples and sing his praises continually!

- Do you find it easy or difficult to share your Christian faith with others? Are there any environments in which this is particularly difficult for you?
- Are you confident in your ability to articulate the basic message of the Gospel and your own faith story? As you attempt to articulate it, does it cause you to surge with joy and confidence, or does the telling of it somehow fall flat?

### **Philippians 4:4-7**

What is it that gives St. Paul the confidence to say something so bold as, “Rejoice in the Lord *always*” and “Do not worry about *anything*”? For the most part, we treat those who take such advice seriously to be hopelessly naïve optimists—unless we ourselves happen to be one! But if we look back a couple of sentences to Philippians 3:20-21, we see one reason for his boldness: “Our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.”

St. Paul sees the changed lives of those who have received the Gospel as evidence of the power of God reordering human hearts from the inside out; this causes the human heart to resemble the heart of God, demonstrating that their true homeland is indeed heavenly rather than earthly (unlike those for whose “god is the belly”). St. Paul knows that this same God will surely soon return to finish the renewing work he started, to make not only our hearts but also our bodies fully like the pure heart and glorified body of Jesus Christ our Savior! With such a God, such a defender and intercessor, and with such a hope, our fear, impatience, and anxiety gradually become swallowed up by the victorious life of Jesus coursing through us, who are his own “flesh and blood,” his Body. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness and confidence, requesting of God (and thanking him ahead of time for) such things as accord with his will through Jesus Christ. Thus shall we come to know the peace of God which passes all understanding.

- Have you ever felt so close to God that “the changes and chances of this mortal life” were unable to shake you as they otherwise might have? Do you often sense Jesus’ nearness in times of fear and anxiety, or is he harder for you to reach at those times?
- Do you feel confident that your heavenly Father answers your prayers?
- Did Paul’s model of prayer – Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God – challenge you in any way?

### **Luke 3:7-18**

*“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”*

How bizarre to think that what John has just proclaimed is called good news by St. Luke! But this is exactly the good news that we have heard and anticipated in our readings from the prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah:

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the Lord is coming to be in our very midst and he is bringing judgment with him. That judgment will at once be salvation to those who humbly repent and bear good fruit, and doom to those who harden their hearts and continue to live selfish lives. Although the Messiah's first coming surprisingly brought mercy, forgiveness, and grace to sinners, his second coming will be in glory to judge both the living and the dead.

Jesus, like John, understood the Son of Man's mission to be to "bring fire upon the earth" (Luke 12:49), and it is for this reason that Jesus undergoes the "baptism" that he is to be baptized with on the cross. This giving of the fire of the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire will not bring peace, however, but division—division because the sins of our own flesh will resist it and because the corporate sin of our communities will resist it. May we be consumed with the fire of His loving Spirit now, that we may avoid the fire of judgment when he returns!

- Did anything surprise you about John's councils to those who came to him? What do you suppose John the Baptist would say if people from your workplace or school or community were to come asking him how to repent?
- The fourth verse of the hymn *How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord* reads: "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine." Have you ever experienced the Lord consuming your dross through fiery trials, or through a fiery experience with him in prayer?

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