

¹⁴ Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. ¹⁶ On that day they will say to Jerusalem, “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Dear Friends in Christ who gives us reason to rejoice,

I was sitting there reading my morning devotion with a cup of coffee when the phone rang. A voice on the other end of that call was crying and in a panic. She said, “Are you a Lutheran pastor? I’m a shut-in in a nursing home and a relative of mine has just died. Can you go and say a prayer to bless him?” I asked a few questions to try to ascertain the deceased’s spiritual condition before he died. Apparently he was a Lutheran. But the caller did not offer any details as to whether her loved one who had just passed away was living his faith at all. The caller truly thought that I could pray a prayer that would be a blessing to her loved one who had passed away. I didn’t ask her, but it sounded like she had some thoughts that other false churches taught her. I thought about our Lord’s story about The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. I’d like to share it with you:

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

What is Jesus teaching us with this story? First, a person’s spiritual condition before he dies determines where he will go after he dies, whether that be Hades (hell) where the rich man ended up, or heaven where Abraham, the Father of all believers and the angels lived. Secondly, once a person is dead and has been judged by God and ends up in heaven or in hell depending on whether he was a believer or an unbeliever, there is no possibility of changing that result. The rich man was suffering in hell and obviously wanted relief from that suffering, even if it was a dip of water to cool his tongue, but Abraham tells us the truth, “**between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.**” Once you are in hell, that is where you will spend eternity. If you are in heaven, that is where you will spend eternity. Thirdly, once the Rich Man realized the hopelessness of changing his outcome in life, he wanted Abraham to go and warn his brothers so that they would not suffer the agony of hell that he was suffering. “**Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.**” Abraham replies, “**They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.**” Moses and the Prophets for us refers to the inspired Word of God recorded in the Bible. God is warning them in the Bible already. Take to heart what God is saying to you in the Bible! The Rich Man didn’t want that. The Bible wasn’t good enough. He wanted God to perform some miracle that would lead his relatives to repent. Abraham replies, “**If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**”

Back to the caller, God has actually given us both the Bible and a miracle. Jesus rose from the dead. That ought to change us! That ought to lead us to repentance in this life. If we believe what the Bible teaches us we will be saved. If we do not believe in what God is telling us through Moses and the Prophets and through Jesus’ resurrection from the dead we will end up in hell for eternity. That judgment is final. The outcome can’t be changed. No pastor has the power or authority to pray a prayer to deliver someone from hell. But God has given us the commission to warn sinners who are still living. That’s what Zephaniah the Prophet did in his day. That’s what John the Baptist did in his day. That’s what

your pastor does in his preaching, especially during the Advent and Lenten seasons of the church year. That's what I tried to do with the caller yesterday. Yes, it's sad when we lose a loved one. We feel so helpless, but God is speaking to us through the death of that person. "The Day of the Lord is coming!" Prepare yourself for that day! Repent! Believe in Jesus for salvation and you will be saved! I told the caller that I wouldn't be able to help her loved one any more, but I could pray for her and I did. She was thankful for my prayer for her, but her voice also revealed a hint of disappointment because she received no assurance that her deceased loved one was helped.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Did you notice that we lit the pink candle. That is the joy candle. It seems a bit early to rejoice when we are still in the Advent season, the season that emphasizes preparing our hearts with repentance. But repentance includes two parts, not just that we are sorry for our sins and pleading for God's mercy, but also faith that God has given us a Savior Jesus Christ. When we have faith in that Savior we have reason to rejoice! Even as the Day of the Lord approaches, whether that be the day we die or the Day that God comes in judgment.

That's what Zephaniah the Prophet taught. Zephaniah lived in the days of Jeremiah. Therefore he lived and preached just before the Babylonian Empire destroyed Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple. His message was a message to prepare people for the day. "The Day is Coming!" He also clearly preaches that those who prepare, who heed God's call to repent, "**can be glad and rejoice with all of their heart!**" Why? ¹⁵ **The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.** The Babylonians would indeed come. God's judgment over Judah was set. It happened in 586 B.C. But those who believed in the promised Savior would not be punished even if they were taken away in captivity or killed by a Babylonian sword. Their Savior would die as their Substitute! By his wounds they were healed! The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. (Isaiah 53:5) In life and in death they did not have to fear God's punishment in hell. Their LORD saved them from it! They could rejoice in that salvation even in death.

"**The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm,**" Zephaniah proclaimed. Yes, many of those who heard him would be marched as captives to Babylon and fear the harm they would endure from their captors! But those who believed in the Messiah could rejoice. The Lord is with them wherever he leads them. Because God was with them they have no reason to fear any harm. Even in death God will deliver them from all harm and danger. And in life God will use all the harm and danger that evil men inflict on us for a blessing in our lives. That's what the story of Joseph teaches us! Joseph's brothers, evil men, sold him into slavery, but God was with Joseph and made their harm turn out for a blessing to Joseph for the salvation of many people! Yes, we can rejoice even in our trials!

¹⁶ **On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.** When people feel powerless, when they are powerless their hands hang limp. But in faith those same powerless hands are raised in exuberant joy and praise. Yes, believers can rejoice even in the darkest of days because they know that God is with them. God is with them, protecting them from all harm and danger, delivering them from evil, quieting and comforting them in their fears and anxieties, and empowering their limp hands to move in service to him! And believe it or not, they actually rejoice with songs on their lips because they are living in God's presence.

And God also rejoices with them! There is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents and prepares for the Day of the Lord! ¹⁷ **The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.**" The Lord is as happy as we are! He is happy because the goal of his work of redemption—saving his elect—has been reached. He is happy because the purpose of creation—that the crown of creation, mankind, might live in his presence forever—has been realized. God's universal restoration, purification (3:9), and deliverance from all enemies (verses 15-17) will be an occasion of joy for God and for his people. (James Westendorf in Peoples' Bible)

This past Tuesday there was a tremendous amount of shock, grief and tears in this place. Chuck, who lost his wife suddenly five weeks ago, also this past week died of a massive heart attack at the age of 66. His friends asked me for my prayer. I used the opportunity to be a Zephaniah. "Lord, may Chuck's death lead each of us to number our days. You have reminded us again that the Day of the Lord is coming. Lead us to repentance and give us faith to believe in Jesus our Savior." The prayers are important, but let our limp hands also be raised to help those who have no hope so that they will be prepared for the Lord's coming. When we act we will also be able to rejoice and be glad even in days of sadness. I experienced that blessing this past week two times. After Chuck's wife died I was able to talk to Chuck on three different occasions. I gave him a devotion book by Rev. Richard Lauersdorf written to help those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. He was happy to receive it and told me that he would gladly read it. Little did I know that the Lord would be using that act of love to prepare Chuck for his own passing a few weeks later. I pray that Chuck is in heaven today. I don't know if he is or not. But this I can tell you! Even though it was sad to hear of his passing, I rejoiced in the opportunity to be the Lord's instrument to help him, yes, to remind him about the need to prepare for the Day of the Lord's coming. I rejoiced in the opportunity to remind the caller yesterday of the same. Did they prepare? That's the work of the Holy Spirit. We are the voice of God calling in our wildernesses around us, Prepare for the Kingdom of God is at hand. When we do that we ought to rejoice that God uses us unworthy sinners to help others. May God give you that joy until he brings you to the place that is joy and pleasure forevermore! Amen.