

Session Fifteen: The Savior Brings Joy

Theme: The Great Reversal

Law/Gospel Focus:

Because of sin, people were guilty before God and deserved the punishment of death. But God in His love for all people designed a loving plan to rescue His people. God would send His Only Son, Jesus, to this earth to do that which sinful people could never do—keep God’s Law by living a sinless, perfect life. And then in a great act of reversal, sinless Jesus would receive the punishment we deserved because of our sin by dying on the cross. Through Jesus’ life and death God would provide us life eternal. In His resurrection Jesus proclaims for us the victory He won over death. Through Jesus we are able to confess with Mary, “for the Mighty One has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49).

Objectives:

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word we will:

- 1) confess our sinfulness for which we deserve death;
- 2) rejoice in the forgiveness God won for us through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection;
- 3) praise God for His words of judgment that show us our sin and our need for a Savior, and for God’s words of mercy that show us our Savior;
- 4) write our own magnificent that proclaims the wonders of God’s work in our lives by His grace through faith in Jesus.

Introduction:

John was sick of his job. Angelique was unfulfilled in her role as wife and mother. Numerous arguments concerning whose job was more difficult had escalated to the point where John resented Angelique’s “freedom to do whatever she wanted during the day.” Angelique coveted John’s ability to be out with other adults “performing meaningful activity.” One Sunday evening after a bitter fight John and Angelique agreed to reverse roles. John would stay at home and care for the children and Angelique would get a job outside of the home.

- 1). What are some possible endings to the story?
- 2). Share some other “reversals” you have heard of or experienced.

God provided a great reversal for us in the person and through the work of Jesus. In this great reversal Jesus received the punishment we deserved because of sin—death—and we received by God’s grace through faith that which on our own we could never earn—eternal life. In today’s lesson we learn of the fulfillment of God’s great plan of reversal as we witness the incarnation of God’s holy, sinless Son, “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,” and the young virgin’s response to this divine miracle.

Inform:

Read aloud Zephaniah 3:14-18; Luke 1:39-55; and Philippians 4:4-9.

Reading the Text:

Zephaniah spoke God's Word to the people of Judah during the early years of king Josiah's rule (around 640 B.C.). Though a descendant of royalty and a prominent member of society, Zephaniah's mission was to bring a startling rebuke to his beloved Jerusalem: guilty! God's people were guilty. They stood under divine judgment for their utter disregard of God's truth and their rebellion against His will. Defiance. Arrogance. Treachery. These were now the marks of the nation's social and spiritual life. In truth, Jerusalem was ready to collapse under the weight of rampant idolatry and willful disobedience.

God's declaration of judgment was, then, swift and severe: "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth" (Zephaniah 1:2). As in the days of Noah, God reveals His will to destroy life on earth, a tragic indication of the depth of Judah's sin and disobedience.

But judgment is not the prophet's only message from God. In mercy, God promise a joyous future for His chosen people. "Sing ... shout aloud ... Be glad and rejoice" (3:14) are the marks of a festival celebration. The Lord, "the King of Israel" (3:15), invites the nation to trust His power to save, even after He disciplines His unruly children. What will God do for His people? Take away their punishment! Turn back their enemy! Protect them from harm! (v.15). Though they suffer hardship for a while—a hardship brought on by their sinfulness—God's people will find strength and comfort in His salvation.

"The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save" (v. 17). God is present with His people. The exile in Babylon might be long, the punishment for their sin painful, but God will never forget His covenant of mercy and steadfast love. Through Zephaniah, God reveals His heart, His fatherly regard for His children.

He will take great delight in you,

He will quiet you with His love,

He will rejoice over you with singing (v. 17).

It is time to celebrate God's love, and the Lord almighty invites and gathers His people for the festival.

Luke 1:39-55. Soon after the angel Gabriel's announcement, Mary visits Elizabeth, her relative, who is six months pregnant with her first child. The fact that both women are expecting is an occasion for rejoicing, as each son is destined for a special role in the redemption of Israel.

Mary travels to a village in Judea. At her greeting, the child in Elizabeth's womb stirs—leaps for joy—at the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth, too, is filled with the Spirit. She

understands that Mary's news marks the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah. Her relative is to be the mother of the savior, the Lord. Elizabeth naturally blesses Mary, as she herself has been blessed by Mary's visit.

The hymn of praise that Mary sings—or speaks—is called the Magnificat (from the Latin “to glorify”). Her words are reminiscent of Old Testament psalms, but show an even closer connection to Hannah's song at the dedication of her son Samuel in the Lord's service (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Mary's hymn expresses joy in God's help and deliverance, once promised and now realized for Abraham's descendants. The Magnificat extols the greatness of God for His people. But Mary's adoration is profoundly personal: “The Mighty One has done great things for me” (v. 49). She praises God for her unique role in God's mighty act of salvation, indeed, for the gift of a son as her own Savior.

The hymn unfolds a major theme in Luke's gospel and in the Christian message: the overthrow of human ways and expectations (the “great reversal”). God reverses the ordinary “rules” of life by choosing the humble and lowly to achieve His purposes. In this way, “no one may boast before Him” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

For Mary, the great reversal means life for God's people. It also means a special place in the story of the savior's birth. “All generations will call me blessed,” she confesses, “for the Mighty One has done great things for me” (Luke 1:48-49).

Discussing the Text:

- 1). Describe Zephaniah's message in terms of “bad news” (Law) and “good” news (Gospel).
- 2). What does Mary's hymn of praise express?
- 3). How does Mary's hymn of praise unfold the theme of the overthrow of human ways and expectations?
- 4). How do the words of Philippians 4:4-9 parallel the message of Mary's song of praise??

Connect:

Even though God's ancient people deserved only judgment, God promised to redeem and restore the nation and He kept His promise. By itself, God's word of condemnation—revealed in the Law—leads only to despair. Humankind is “guilty as charged,” with no right to appeal God's righteous verdict. In Christ, though, God's final word is “not guilty.” He now delights in us and

quiets us with His love, love revealed in His only Son. As God chose Mary, a humble, sinful servant, by His grace, He chooses us also through His love in Jesus our Savior. By the Spirit's power, Mary responds to God's promise in faith. Believers today respond in praise and service to God's priceless gift of salvation.

In many respects, the world operates on the principles of merit: we are "rewarded" for our knowledge or efforts or skill or achievement. In sending His Son to earth, God reverses ordinary human ways to reveal His unmerited, undeserved goodness and love.

Christians, too, may fall prey to the lure of "self-justification" before God and others. The Gospel, however, proclaims pure grace. God forgives, not on the basis of merit or worthiness, but through Christ. In the Law we see both God's righteousness and our own flaws and failures. In the Gospel we see the Savior who redeems us with His blood and makes us His beloved, forgiven children—all by His mercy alone! Like Mary, we confess, "[The Lord] has done great things for me!"

1). How does God reverse ordinary human ways to reveal His unmerited, undeserved goodness and love for all people?

2) How is God's great reversal revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection? Consider: What do we receive because of Jesus' death on the cross and glorious resurrection?

3). God's great reversal is considered "foolishness" to those who have not received the gift of saving faith in Jesus. How might God's plan of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone seem foolish?

4). God's great reversal gives us life—eternal life. Because of God's great love for you and all people demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God declares us sinners, "Not guilty" through faith. Write a hymn of praise for that which God accomplished for you by His great plan of reversal.