

## **“Zion’s Song: Singin’ the Blues Away”**

*Zephaniah 3:14-20 Luke 1:26-38*

*Sermon by Rev. Dr. John M. Best to the First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek  
December 13, 2020*

*“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, Shout, O Israel.*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem.” (Zephaniah 3:14)*

### **Zephaniah encourages us to sing, rejoice and exult, but that’s been hard this year.**

Election years always sharpen the divisions among us.

Half of us may be rejoicing, the other denying the election results.

I can’t remember any like this one.

This year we wonder if democracy itself, our great experiment, will hold up.

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted schools and universities, sports,  
closed restaurants, event venues, and church sanctuaries

causing us to adapt and learn new ways of teaching, doing business,  
and even for us late adapting Presbyterians learned to worship online.

Zephaniah’s call to sing lands like a thud.

#### **WE CAN’T SAFELY SING TOGETHER.**

We are supposed to socially distance ourselves from each other.

Choirs and choruses, at best, must learn to do so apart

and some computer genius edits all the recorded voices together.

We are **social creatures** and distancing ourselves from each other takes an emotional toll.

Depression and suicide attempts are up.

### **I’ve never been clinically depressed, but I have gotten emotionally pretty low at times.**

#### **When I was working full time, on my down days**

when the weighed of responsibility weighed a bit on my shoulders;

when the accumulation of pressing matters stacked up;

when the spinning plates start falling to the floor,

like on the old variety tv shows with one too many to keep spinning,

when the fallen plates aren’t broken dishes,

but a minister in crisis;

a church in pastoral transition needing a list of interim pastor candidates;

a MIF to match on the Church Leadership Connection;

a blog, a sermon, a report to write,

a meeting agenda to prepare,

a committee leader to support,

a staff to supervise,

a camp in crisis,

a needful daughter, a patient wife, a dying parent,

when the evil cloud of depression covers over all the good,

and I am left with only my feelings of guilt

that I am not superman,

that I can’t fix what’s broken

**on those dark days there is no song in my life.**

I WONDER IF IT’S LIKE THAT FOR YOU?

I SUSPECT IT'S LIKE THAT FOR MOST.

**We enjoy a plethora of possibilities** in our lives, which gives the **burden of choice making**.

When **my son, Nate**, was in high school, he did his best to do it all:

cross country, Winter track, Spring track,  
Senior play, Musical, concert band, jazz band, chorus,  
church, youth group.

When he entered college, the hardest lesson his first semester  
was choosing from a far larger menu of opportunities.

Like in Sandy and Harry Chaplin's song, he grew up just like me, busy, busy, busy.

*"He'd grown up just like me*

*My boy was just like me*

*And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon*

*Little boy blue and the man in the moon."*<sup>1</sup>

The whole world lies open to us.

Which plates have you chosen to spin at the expense of your loved ones?

How many plates have you attempted to spin?

**Until this year** when everything came to a screeching halt, stuck at home.

The shutdown didn't affect me so very much.

This was my first year of retirement...when I was already shifting from doing to being.

I had to begin figuring out how fill my time now that a job didn't decide for me.

Some of you have already walked that road,  
and you've found a place volunteering at church.

For which the church is grateful.

The biggest disruption for me was the cancelation of a long awaited Viking Cruise.

And not being about to sing in the church choir I had just joined.

But some of you were still going full tilt,

And now trying to manage bored kids at home, while working from home,  
while risking your health as an essential worker during a pandemic,  
just adds to those spinning plates, increasing your stress.

Stress is not a bad thing, but when it is prolonged and unrelieved it can kill you.

**Jim, my brother in law**

is Vietnam war veteran, a veteran police officer, and a type A personality,

With just a high school education, he rose through the ranks to become  
the assist. to the Director of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.

So he began taking night courses to get the college degree,

the only thing standing between him & becoming the next director.

Stress took a toll on his heart.

He was forced to retire early on disability.

Unrelieved stress can kill you.

But some of us just can't sit still, we need to be doing something, guilt ridden if we don't.

**And in that downward tailspin of such thoughts, there is likely no song in your life, either.**

Then the wind shifts, the sun comes out, a blue sky appears;  
you notice again the beauty around you, the flowers in bloom, the birds singing,  
the waves of the lake still roll in on the beach,  
the moon and stars shine in the night sky.  
You realize that the world with all its challenges and brokenness carries on.

And the Spirit **gives me/gives us a song.**

And you read in **Scripture:** *"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you."*

And the **prophet's** words speak directly to you,

*"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you"* (Zephaniah 3:15).

And **the Spirit** blows the gloom away and places a song like an ear worm into your head.

*"Sing aloud, O post-exilic Jews,*

*Shout, post-modern Americans.*

*Rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem"* (Zeph. 3:14).

#### **AND YOU'VE GOT YOURSELF A SONG!**

My voice isn't what it once was, alas, but music is still a tonic for me.

I generally always emerge from a dark time with a song in my head, and on my heart.

I wonder if it's that way for you.

#### **Zion was suffering from depression and guilt.**

After a couple of chapters of raking them over the coals for their sins,  
Zephaniah gave Zion a song of encouragement, an Apocalyptic Song,  
a song of how God will come.

#### **The Prophet Zephaniah preached, shouted, and I think sang,**

*"On that day to come it will be said,*

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

*He will renew you in his love;*

*He will exult over you with loud singing."* (Zeph. 3:17).

Did you catch that? **"God will exult over you with loud singing."**

Zion's song is God's song singing to us.

Notice how the pronouns the prophet uses switches from "he" to "I".

*"At that time*

*I will remove disaster from you.*

*I will deal with all your oppressors.*

*I will save the lame and gather the outcast.*

*I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.*

*I will bring you home when I gather you.*

*I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth.*

*When I restore your fortunes before your eyes."* (Zeph. 3:18-20).

I'm not making this up. It's right there in Scripture.

**Zion's Song is the Lord's Love Song** of deliverance.

You'll be ok. Hang in there. Let go of the stress. Keep plugging at the important things. Everything will be alright. God's got this. God sings to us, "I'VE GOT THIS."

That's why on this third Sunday of Advent,

this third Sunday of waiting in darkness and preparation, we light a pink candle of joy.

For we are given Zion's Song, God's restorative love song sounding over us.

And if we listen closely, we hear what Mary hears from Gabriel.

*"You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."*

It will be different for each of us than for Mary, but none the less, I think that

we too will conceive and bear a purpose, a service, a ministry, a mission,

that will brighten the lives of others...and give purpose to our lives.

Jesus would later teach us, *"You are the salt of earth."* (Matthew 5:13).

*"You are the light of the world."* (Matthew 5:14).

*"Together you are my body in the world."*

And like Mary, we ask, how can that be? I've never done anything.

To which Gabriel rebuts, *"Nothing will be impossible with God."* (Luke 1:37).

My wife, Eileen, and I watched a couple of **Dolly Parton's Christmas movies** this weekend.

Dolly told a couple of stories of her childhood experiences growing up poor

in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee.

She played a cameo appearance in each movie,

and said to the little girl playing the part of young Dolly,

who was describing all her struggles and the challenges of her family,

Dolly said to her,

*"That sounds like a country song ready to be written."*

Which is exactly what Dolly would grow up to do, and has done her whole career, write songs.

Her mother had given her a gift of a multicolored coat, like Joseph's in the Bible.

She stitched it together out of rag pieces,

Dolly wrote a song about it and it became her theme song of her career.

She and her seven siblings gave up their Christmas gifts one year,

to help their daddy buy a wedding ring for his wife, their mother.

About it, she wrote the song, "Circle of love."

**Every Country Western song** of poor white rural folks

tells the story of some hard tragedy overcome by love.

Every **Blues Song** of black folks

tells the story naming their hard struggle

And every Blues Songs become an African American Spiritual

when they tell of the accompanying hand of the Lord getting them through it to the promised land.

**Zion's song,**

tells the story of God exulting over them, over all of us with God's love, sustaining them and pulling us through, **whether we can sing or not.**

**Because God, God is with us, God is singing exulting over us,  
doing the impossible things we can't imagine to set things right.  
Such a song, Zion's Song heard in the darkest of times,  
lifts us up and enables us to sing your blues away.**

**CHARGE:**

Hang in there. Let go of the stress. Keep plugging at your God given purpose.  
Everything will be alright. God's got this. For nothing will be impossible with God.

**BENEDICTION:**

The Lord does bless you and keep you.  
The Lord is kind and gracious to you.  
The Lord looks upon you with favor and exults over you.  
Let that give you peace.

<sup>1</sup> Source: [LyricFind](#), Songwriters: Sandy Chapin / Harry F. Chapin "Cat's in the Cradle" Lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc

*My child arrived just the other day  
He came to the world in the usual way  
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay  
He learned to walk while I was away  
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew  
He'd say "I'm gonna be like you, dad"  
"You know I'm gonna be like you"  
And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon  
Little boy blue and the man in the moon*

*"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when"  
But we'll get together then  
You know we'll have a good time then  
My son turned ten just the other day  
He said, thanks for the ball, dad, come on let's play  
Can you teach me to throw, I said-a, not today  
I got a lot to do, he said, that's okay  
And he, he walked away, but his smile never dimmed  
It said, I'm gonna be like him, yeah  
You know I'm gonna be like him  
And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon  
Little boy blue and the man in the moon*

*"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when"  
But we'll get together then  
You know we'll have a good time then  
Well, he came from college just the other day  
So much like a man I just had to say  
Son, I'm proud of you, can you sit for a while?  
He shook his head, and they said with a smile  
What I'd really like, dad, is to borrow the car keys  
See you later, can I have them please?*

*And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon  
Little boy blue and the man in the moon*

*"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when"  
But we'll get together then, dad  
You know we'll have a good time then  
I've long since retired, my son's moved away  
I called him up just the other day  
I said, I'd like to see you if you don't mind  
He said, I'd love to, dad, if I can find the time  
You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kids have the flu  
But it's sure nice talking to you, dad  
It's been sure nice talking to you  
And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me  
He'd grown up just like me  
My boy was just like me  
And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon  
Little boy blue and the man in the moon*

*"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when"  
But we'll get together then, dad  
We're gonna have a good time then.*