

## **Sermon—Third Sunday of Advent**

12 December 2021

R. Susan Smandych

Today we're celebrating the Third Sunday in Advent - which is traditionally known as 'Gaudete' Sunday, from the Latin word for 'joy' - and today's readings reflect a mood of great joy and great expectation.

For many people, this time leading up to Christmas is their favorite time of year, because it is a time of joy. It is a time of joy because they get together with family and friends they have not seen in a while. It is a time of joy because they exchange gifts and maybe go on vacation. And it is a time of joy for Christians, because we look forward to celebrating the birth of our Savior. But for some people, this time of year is not a time of joy, but a season of sadness, separation, and suffering. The weeks leading up to Christmas are full of anxiety, grief, even depression. They may miss loved ones who live just too far away to visit, or those who have passed away; they may be reminded of difficult events that have happened during this time of year; or they may be oppressed or living in a precarious situation, and they cannot provide for, or even protect, themselves or their loved ones.

This Advent, we have heard about some people who are living in precarious situations: on Advent 1, Reverend Andrew highlighted the plight of refugees, and on Advent 2, we heard from our guest Kris Clemens, who spoke about both the unsheltered homeless and the hidden homeless living within our city - even within this parish.

There are also other people who live in precarious situations, but with whom we may not be quite as familiar. Internally Displaced Persons (or IDPs) are people who are forcibly displaced from their homes by civil unrest, ethnic or religious strife, and/or violations of human rights, but yet remain within their own countries. Unlike refugees, IDPs have no guaranteed international protection, but are supposed to receive some assistance from their own governments - although most of them never do. Today, there are over 80 million IDPs in our world, almost half of them children.

Forcible displacement is found on all continents, and the countries which now have the largest IDP populations include Syria, Colombia, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Somalia. I directly encountered IDPs in late 2009, when I was working in an island nation called Timor-Leste and lived across the street from an IDP camp which was in a school yard. Since then, I have realized that we need not look far to encounter IDPs within our own context: it could be argued that the mass relocation of Indigenous people off of their ancestral lands was a form of internal displacement (which has since been perpetuated by centuries of colonialism), and that the thousands of Indigenous children who were forcibly displaced from their families to attend residential schools, were actually IDPs themselves...

But the precarious situation of IDPs is not a new issue. Examples of internal, forcible displacement are woven throughout history, and reflected in Biblical narratives. For example, in the first century A.D., early Christians experienced internal displacement as a result of

religious persecution and violence. And today's first reading, a poetic passage from the minor prophet Zephaniah, was written at a time when the people of God, who had been displaced from Jerusalem, were just about to return home. Zephaniah lived during the reign of Josiah of Judah in seventh century BC, when the nation was ravaged by enemies and ethnic strife, and overcome by Assyrian supremacy, leaving its people scattered, disoriented, and afraid – essentially, the IDPs of their time.

The passage we heard from Zephaniah comes at the end of that book, after two chapters focused on sin and wickedness and corrupt religious practices and prophecies about judgment. --- But then Zephaniah takes an abrupt turn, 'does a 180', and he invites the 'remnant', these IDPs, to rejoice because salvation is at hand.

In the first verse, Zephaniah calls for the displaced people, those who have been saddened, separated, and who have suffered, to rejoice, to sing aloud, even to shout for joy - and then he gives them reasons to do so.

Zephaniah pronounces that their 'slates have been wiped clean', that God has erased judgment for their sins.

Zephaniah proclaims that God is in their midst, that God 'has their backs', that they have no reason to fear.

God is present with them. God celebrates them. God intends for them not only to survive, but to thrive.

And then God Himself directly 'chimes in'. To His hurting people, God promises a new world: a world where justice will be restored; a world where the oppressed will be delivered; a world where those who have been displaced will return home. God promises to rescue and gather up scattered people, to bring them home.

This passage from Zephaniah is often called 'A Song of Joy' and for good reason: it was a song celebrating the joy of salvation, salvation which was at hand for the IDPs during Zechariah's time, as they returned home...

During Advent, and especially on this third Sunday of Advent, this 'Gaudete' Sunday, this Sunday of joy, we too are invited to sing for joy, and to celebrate that the joy of salvation is also at hand today. The joy of salvation is at hand for IDPs across our world; the joy of salvation is at hand for anyone who finds themselves in a season of sadness, separation, or suffering; and the joy of salvation is at hand for each and every one of us.

Just as He did for the IDPs in Zephaniah's time, God has wiped away our sins of the past; God is in our midst here in the present, and delights over us; and God promises to rescue and to gather us up, and to bring us to an eternal home with Him in the future. As we continue to look forward to the coming of our Lord, to the birth of the One who brings salvation, may we rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is near! Thanks be to God!