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**“A Picture of God”**  
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***Zephaniah 3:14-20***

Do any of you have photos you especially like, perhaps of someone who means a great deal to you? If you look at the photos in your phone, who is there? Do you have pictures of people on display in your home, so you see them every day? We have photos in our home of our grandparents, parents, and our sons. From the time I was a baby, my dad used to take pictures of my sisters and me every year when we were growing up. Each year we would select what we thought was the best picture and that would be made into an 8 x 10 and put on the mantle over the fireplace for a year. Each year it would be a big deal when we selected the new photo from the good ones from the previous year, and when the new 8 x 10 one was placed on the mantle. Each year the change in our appearance was significant. The albums with those 8 x 10 pictures tracing our lives from birth to when we graduated from high school show our growth from infancy to young adulthood.

Why do we like pictures? There are probably many reasons, but perhaps the #1 reason is because they help us to remember people, times, and events that are significant for us that otherwise we simply could not recall in the same way. The saying, *A picture is worth a thousand words*, is true. Some of us, depending on the type of phone we own, get prompted with memories of photos we've taken in the past.

Last October, Jill and I traveled to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania which is such a meaningful place to visit. The battle of Gettysburg was a crucial moment in the American Civil War of the 1860's. One of the many changes brought by that war was the use of photography. The pictures taken by Matthew Brady and other photographers graphically brought the horrors of war from battles like Gettysburg into American homes for the first time. Ever since technology allowed them to do so – soldiers have taken pictures of loved ones with them wherever they went, and families have had photos of loved ones who are serving in their homes.

For many who have lost a loved one in a war, a picture of a man or woman in uniform, forever young, still brings tears up from a well of emotion that will never run dry. I've visited homes where such pictures are prominently and poignantly displayed. When I was in seminary, I visited an older woman from the church I was working at and on the wall of her living room was a picture of handsome young man in uniform. I asked about him, and she replied that her son had been in the Army Air Corps in World War II, and he had been killed when his plane was shot down. More than 40 years later, she could only say a few words before her eyes became full and her voice choked with emotion. She said, *“One of my friends told me, ‘God must have needed him to do something for him in heaven so that is why He took him.’”* Then she began to cry from somewhere deep inside her memory and her loss. Her friend may have been trying to be helpful, but what she said implied that God would take someone from us because God needed them more than we did which isn't necessarily true.

Whenever we speak about God, we need to be cautious and humble because those words carry so much weight. This woman may have held onto her friend's statement as a way to cope with her loss. But **the impact of that was for over 40 years she was carrying around a picture of a selfish, uncaring God who plucks loved ones away whenever God wants or needs them, regardless of the pain it causes those left behind.**

This is not a clear picture of God. All of us who take or see pictures know that even with digital photography, some may come out sharp, clear, and centered. These are usually other people's pictures, not mine. Some pictures are out of focus - we hit the button when we don't mean to, someone has an eye closed or is looking the wrong way. Often, we have pictures that end up deleted or in the garbage in order to get the one that's just right.

Many people have mental pictures of God that should be deleted or placed in the garbage because those pictures are distorted, out of focus, or because someone hit the button at the wrong time and what they think about God is not in fact what God is like at all. Even the Apostle Paul confessed in *1 Corinthians 13:12* that no matter how much we try to see God correctly, our picture of God is fuzzy, it isn't in high definition. ***“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”***

There are many pictures of God in the Bible. Today, I want to share one from *Zephaniah 3*. This chapter presents an image of God that captures some of God's distinguishing characteristics, some of God's key features that unlike ours will never be diminished by age or time. Zephaniah's ministry took place during the reign of King Josiah whose reforms sought to return the people of God to the beliefs and practices Moses had given. Because the first two chapters are filled with condemnation and the threat of God's judgment and destruction if the people didn't change their ways and renew their relationship with the Lord, it's likely Zephaniah was written about the year 630 BC before the reforms of King Josiah in 621 BC. (*You can read about those reforms in 2 Kings 23*). *Zephaniah 3:14-20* tells us about the Lord and gives hope to those who seek to remain humble and faithful. Listen closely for all the Lord says he **will** do:

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!  
The LORD has **taken away the judgments against you,**  
he has turned away your enemies.  
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall **fear disaster no more.**  
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
**Do not fear, O Zion; do not** let your hands grow weak.  
**The LORD, your God, is in your midst,**  
**a warrior who gives victory;**  
**he will rejoice over you with gladness,**  
**he will renew you in his love;**  
**he will exult over you with loud singing** as on a day of festival.  
**I will remove** disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.  
**I will deal** with all your oppressors at that time.  
And **I will save** the lame and **gather** the outcast,  
and **I will change** their **shame into praise** and renown in all the earth.  
At that time **I will bring you home,** at the time **when I gather you;**  
for **I will make you renowned** and praised among all the peoples of the earth,  
**when I restore your fortunes** before your eyes, says the LORD.”*

**Let's look at this picture of God.  
Zephaniah says The Lord your God is in our midst and is like**

## **A warrior who gives victory – the Lord is mighty to save.**

God is mighty to save God's people. Did you hear all the things God promises to do in those verses? God will, **“take away the judgments against you, rejoice, renew, exult, remove, deal, save, gather, change, bring you home, make you renowned, and restore your fortunes.”**

God is mighty to save. It isn't fun to play a game if the teams are stacked so one side is sure to win. In the game of life, however, it is nice to be on the Lord's side because God's team is going to win. It's been said of a well-known football coach that, *“he could beat your team with his guys, and he could beat his guys with yours.”* Whichever side he led; he'd win. That is what it is like with the Lord. We hope in God's power to save us, even from the finality of death.

The Lord is powerful and mighty. If I asked you to think of something powerful, what do you think of? You might say a hurricane, an aircraft carrier, no matter what you think of that's powerful, it's nothing compared to the awesome power of God.

Zephaniah says God is like **a just and mighty warrior**, dressed for battle, committed to saving and rescuing people from danger. **The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness – the Lord will take great delight in you.** I hope you have someone who delights in you. Someone who lights up when she or he sees you and is glad whenever you're together. For some of you that's a person, for other people it could be a pet. No one does unconditional love and gladness like a dog.

**The second thing we notice about God in Zephaniah's picture is God's gladness and joy in being in close relationship with us.** Many of us carry pictures of loved ones on our phones or devices. Don't you tend to like and keep the ones where people are smiling and look happy? Have you ever imagined the Lord carrying your picture and showing it to angels? Part of why God is portrayed as being so hurt and angry in Zephaniah is that the people have not listened to, followed, or drawn near to the Lord. The joy of this passage comes from the fact that the judgment we deserve has been lifted by the same Lord who is in our midst. God commutes the sentence and rejoices among us who have been forgiven and given a chance to live another day in renewed relationship with the Lord. This is the same picture of God we see in Jesus' wonderful story of the loving father with two sons in *Luke 15*. The father in that story doesn't treat either son like he deserves, and instead treats both of his children with grace and love. The father rejoices with gladness over the son that was lost and is found.

**It is vitally important to grasp the idea that the Lord takes great delight in us when we change our ways and humbly invite God to guide our lives.** God rejoices with gladness and takes great delight in us when we turn our lives over to the Lord more and more in greater and deeper obedience.

**The third thing to notice in this picture of God is the Lord will renew you in his love – or quiet you with his love.** This is the most difficult part of the verse to translate; however, God's love comes through. The Hebrew translates to, *“He will hold his peace in his love.”* God is much like a parent embracing a child, holding her, letting tears fall, and in the divine embrace, we calm down, our fear goes away, and we even sense a renewal of confidence and security that comes from knowing we are deeply loved. I think in all of us there is a child that desires to feel the love of

God surrounding us in such a way that we know we are safe. When you feel loved and safe in the Lord's embrace, your pulse rate lowers, your breathing deepens, and you know the peace that surpasses all understanding. Zephaniah's picture of God is beautiful, the Lord is mighty and powerful, able to protect and save, the Lord gladly delighting and rejoicing in God's people, God's peaceful, renewing love comforting and soothing us. The final part of this picture of God is celebration.

**The fourth thing Zephaniah says is the Lord will exult or rejoice over you with loud singing.** When was the last time someone rejoiced over you with loud singing? Maybe at your birthday. Birthday singing isn't always the most inspiring. It's nice when people rejoice over us with loud singing or even shouting. Singing is one of the most inspiring aspects of worship as we lift our voices together to the Lord. Do you ever think about God rejoicing over you with loud singing? Have you ever thought of God serenading you? Of God trying to win your heart and your love?

*Fiddler on the Roof* was a great musical with so many good songs. One of them is "Do You Love Me?" Tevye asks his wife Golde, "But do you love me?" She replies, "Do I love you? For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes  
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house  
Given you children, milked the cow  
After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?"

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Golde and Tevye go on to sing a duet about love and conclude after all they've shared, experienced, and been through together, they decide they do love each other after all. For thousands of years and for your entire life, God has been singing half of that kind of duet; hoping that you will join and sing of your love in return.

One memorable aspect of Zephaniah's picture of God is how the various perspectives appeal to different people. Some relate to the mighty, saving warrior image and others appreciate the view of God rejoicing with gladness and delight. Some like to meditate on God's peace and love while others appreciate a God who sings with gusto. Depending on what's going on in your life, a different aspect of God's character may speak more to you than another. But they're all good and important and helpful.

**God is a mighty warrior who gives victory – able and wanting to save,  
God rejoices with gladness and delight over you,  
God calms you with the Lord's peace and love, and  
God exults over you with singing.**

That's a God worth knowing, worshiping, loving, and serving. That is a picture of God worth keeping in your phone, on your mantle, and in your heart.

**Prayer** – Jesus is all these things too – the mighty and powerful Savior who saves you from death and sin, He delights in you, is gentle and humble in heart and gives you peace that surpasses understanding.

## Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Do you have any favorite photographs in your home, on your phone or on another electronic device that you look at frequently? Why is that photo important to you? Who or what is in the photo?
2. When you picture God, what do you envision or see? Who or what is in the image you see?
3. What does the prophet mean that God is a mighty warrior who gives victory— able and wanting to save?
4. What difference would it make for us to believe God rejoices with gladness and delight over us? If you believe that in your heart, how might that impact you?
5. Zephaniah says, God calms us with the Lord's peace and love. Is this something you've experienced? Have you ever felt the Lord's peace and love calming you when you were stressed, anxious, afraid, or grieving? What was that like?
6. Finally, the prophet says God exults over us with singing. When and where do you tend to sing? What sort of music is it? What would it be like to have God serenading you, trying to win your love?
7. Which of these images speaks to you the most in your life? Why is that particular image meaningful for you?