The final verses of the 3rd chapter of Zephaniah are welcome news to all of God’s people, for in these words we learn of God’s nature. In our last two weeks, we have witnessed a very familiar cycle that is expressed throughout the Biblical text, namely, the people of God rebelling (in Zephaniah’s case, it was the worshiping of false gods), and subsequently, God’s judgment being poured forth on the people. Fortunately, thought, with God our story does not end here. As we witness time and again in holy scripture, God’s judgment and discipline are followed with God extending mercy to His people.

In the passage this week, there is a promise from God that the peoples’ speech will be pure, and it will lead to hope, salvation, and restoration (v. 9). This will occur in Jerusalem and beyond, even into foreign countries that extend beyond the rivers of Cush (v. 10). Even the foreign peoples will bring offerings unto the Lord! (Perhaps a sign of the promulgation of the faith?) A remnant, a holy remnant, humble and powerless, just and pure will be preserved. Restoration, reconciliation and forgiveness will be found precisely because God is in their midst, and in his presence there will be rejoicing and singing (v.14-17). The people will be given a place of notoriety among the neighboring lands and they will be made whole (v.20).

These acts are the Lord’s doing. The Lord extends judgment and the Lord extends mercy. Judgment occurs when the actions of the people are contrary to that which God would desire, according to Zephaniah. Mercy is experienced when the hearts of the people turn from their destructive ways and the good and peaceful life that God intended for creation from the beginning is experienced once more.

The passage is a culmination of this cycle of human relationship with God, which moves from times of disobedience and faithlessness to seasons of obedience and faithfulness (and often back again!). These verses point us to the “new creation” and the joy of the “new people of God” singing and shouting because God’s judgment is no more. With God for them, no one can be against them. Peace reigns and God reigns in their midst. All is well.

This picture is the final message of Zephaniah. It is a portrait of joyful fellowship and was presented to 7th century BC Judah, offering hope and a desired future. It is a message that appears often in both the Old and New Testaments. You can hear overtones of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, for example, where “God’s dwelling is with humankind. He will dwell with them and they will be his people (Rev. 21.3).” It is a message that is Good News for us all.

Application

Becoming a parent five years ago was certainly the most significant change in my life. While there are many “life cycle” events that we experience that move us from one place to another, welcoming another human being into your world, and having responsibility for her (and her sister only 16 months later!) causes you to think about the ways that you guide and shape the process of learning and growing for this tiny, little person who will look to you to understand life and living.
As sleepless nights and late night feedings gave way to sitting up and crawling, and babbling gave way to speaking the first word (which was “No”), it was apparent that this little person who is now part of our lives had a personality all of her own. Not only that, as each day passed, we saw she also had a pretty strong will to go with that personality! (Abigail and I are still giving the other credit for giving her this trait!) Before long, she was walking and exploring and getting into all kinds of things. And as we were aware that she was developing a sense of what the “boundaries” were, we had those first times where she did things we knew that she knew she was not supposed to do. So, with the ball back in our court, based on her action, we had a choice: Do we let it go, or do we discipline her?

Knowing that one of the things we are entrusted with doing as parents is to teach right from wrong, we knew we had no choice but to discipline our child. This was not any fun for either of us, after subsequent warnings to stop doing something, to then have to place her in “time out” or to not allow her to have a toy. But it was meant as a corrective action. However, we didn’t leave her in time out or take away her toy forever. There were tears and temper tantrums when we would discipline her. But, there was, after a period of time, a conversation about why the thing she was doing was wrong, the reassurance that we loved her, a hug and a kiss, and the hope that whatever it was would not happen again.

This cycle has been repeated hundreds of times in the last five years in our home! I am sure there are hundreds more to follow in the years go come. But this captures the essence of how God relates to us through our own life’s journey. There are times where admonishment will come, but it doesn’t stop there. There is always reconciliation and restoration available with God. The hope, from God’s vantage point, is that the times of difficulty we experience will be times of learning that will move us to a place where we can live in ways more like how God would want us to live.

Willful disobedience will have consequences and willful disobedience cheapens the grace that God extends to us. Each day we should strive to keep God at the center of our life and work, and when those moments come where we do encounter difficulties, realizing perhaps that we are the culprits of this difficulty in our own lives, we should seek to move quickly to God, who stands ready to receive and welcome us back into the joy of right relationship with Him.

Zephaniah chronicled this very journey for 7th century Judah. All of us are on this journey today – in that we will have both times of faithlessness and faithfulness in our own relationship with God. Let us remember, however, that God’s preferred future is one where restoration and reconciliation reign among the people. What an amazing gift for us all!