

Smile! Jesus Loves (To Save) You!

It was a Thursday evening when Randy snuck out. There was a party on the other side of town, one that everyone was going to be at. And it turned into an excellent party. So good that 3am rolled around before he blinked 3 times, it seemed, and Randy knew he had to be home before his dad got up for work in a few short hours. His dad could not see the car gone and the bed empty

So he went outside and was rummaging through his pocket to grab his keys as he walked towards his car. He fumbled to get the key into the lock a few times before dropping them. Only a few more attempts and he was in, but the same dilemma occurred with the ignition. The key wouldn't slide in like usual, and then he dropped them, again.

In haste, he bent over to pick up the keys and smashed his head against the steering wheel, the horn blaring. That was a wake-up call. He wasn't simply too tired. He wasn't fit to drive.

So with some shame and more than a little bit of fear, he pulled out his cellphone to call home. He would ask his dad to come pick him up, and until then he'd get some shut-eye in the passenger's seat.

When the dad shows up, what's running through his mind? Is he thinking "I told you so" or "I warned you about doing this" or "I have to work in 3 hours—you wait until I get home and you'll know what kind of trouble you're in"?

Maybe

But he's also thinking "thank you for calling me." He's feeling pure relief, even joy, that in the midst of drunkenness and fear, his message of love and care to his son was remembered.

Our God has much the same sentiments over us. Though we have been warned over and over again of the demands of God and His judgment on sinners, He welcomes us home, joyfully, just as the Father of the prodigal Son did. There's nothing begrudging, no "I'm getting sick and tired of this" attitude. Simple welcome at the potential for reconciliation, let alone the reality of it.

Our Old Testament text gives us a pretty good picture of His excitement about bringing His lost ones home to Him. The text comes at the end of Zephaniah, a short but terrifying book. Prophesying prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple, Zephaniah warned of coming destruction if people did not amend their ways and live in line with God's laws rather than simply presuming "we're YHWH's people, descendants of Abraham, so we're always in the good." They had become complacent and indeed indulgent with idols and this, God was sure to wipe away. The Day of the Lord was coming and that was surely to be a day of wrath on all whose hands had served an idol or committed injustice on the lowly and downtrodden.

But those surrounding Judah were not safe either. Those who worshipped idols would not be safe, not even the nations used as God's own hands in the punishment of Israel; they too would be subject to His anger because they had become proud and overstepped the boundaries laid out for them.

And amidst all these threats, there is the call to seek the Lord, to forsake idols and other nations and to turn to the God who had created and called them, who had cared for them in the midst of all their trials.

His promise is that He would remove from their midst the proudly exultant ones and leave in their midst a people humble and lowly, who seek refuge in the name of the Lord. And our text is the command to these left, the remnant. They are to rejoice and sing loudly to their LORD. Yet their joy is nothing compared to the joy of the one who has saved them.

It is His great joy, His good pleasure, His pure delight

To 1. care for and protect a remnant;

To 2. remove their fear and their punishments;

To 3. dwell with them in their midst and give them His joy.

**Even though** His anger burned strong, even though they had all but rejected Him, for the sake of those to whom He had promised descendants more numerous than the stars and for the sake of these

very descendants, He was faithful to cause faith in some, so His people would continue. Though these few suffered through the exile like the rest, despite seeing death and torture and despair, by His grace they turned to Him and remained faithful to Him, and by His care they were kept faithful. A remnant kept faith wherever they were, whether they returned to Jerusalem or lived elsewhere among the people in the Jewish dispersion, He kept a hope alive for the time when His promise of His joy revealed would come to pass.

**And even though** this remnant endured alongside the rest of the Israelites the punishment for the nation's sin, there was a promise of restoration and the removal of fear and judgment. The people would be restored, no longer trembling at their current situation, no longer at the mercy of whichever nation God was using to purge away their sin. They would never need to fear evil and its turmoil, nor the judgment and punishment of God because their sin would be done away with as they turned to Him. After this short period would come a time of peace, and all this is because

**Even though** it appeared they would be as far away from God as possible, miles from the temple, His dwelling place—or the rubble of it after its destruction—God would be in their midst. It was His joy to follow them into exile when it finally happened and to care for them amidst their captors. And because God would be with them, they need not fear nor tremble at the horrors imposed upon them, that they might be wiped out, but they could live confidently knowing that they would be restored because the God who had promised just that was living with them.

It was God's joy to bring to them salvation. From their own sin and its consequences, from that which they had fully earned, just as if they had done it to themselves, He wanted to save them. And so He kept offering His Gospel, His promises to them—turn from idols and cling to me, for I am holding you and will preserve you, even if only a remnant, a few cling faithfully.

And Zephaniah's prophecy is entirely fulfilled. The people He spoke to were indeed taken into a terrible exile and commanded to live there for 70 years, give or take a few depending on when and if

you returned. And eventually, even though the temple was destroyed and a generation passed, the pathway was opened to return—God was faithful to His people, and all this so that He may be faithful to the full remnant, to the entirety of stars descending from Abraham.

He was faithful to bring His people home so that He might live in their midst in the flesh, that He might speak His own Words of salvation with His own mouth, and remove the fear of evil and judgments by His own two hands, that He might bring His joy with His own two feet.

For you and me, who are not Israelites in Exile, we dwell in our own exile, living in a sinful yet redeemed flesh, waiting for the gates of the promised land to be swung wide open. We tremble at the hands of our enemies as sin, the devil, and this tormenting world bring chaos and disease and threats unnumbered our way. We know all too well the judgments that are properly our own, for our hasty judgments of others and our neglect of His Word, Love, and actions.

And yet, because Christ became flesh and dwelled amidst His people and promised to continue dwelling in our midst by His Word and Sacraments, even for you and me, He removes this terror and replaces it with His joy. He keeps your faith alive by His tender care through His Word and He sings joyfully over you that you might know His delight and comfort and peace.

It often doesn't feel like it, especially in a Church such as the Lutheran Church which highlights our guilt and need for a saviour so much—this often leads to a timid coming before God, as if He might get tired of hearing our confession because we lay it before Him so often. But truly, as sure as the sun is bright and you and I need oxygen, it is God's utter joy, delight, pleasure, ecstasy, to forgive you of your sins, to love you, to cherish you. Not because of anything you have done or demonstrated or offered Him. But because it was His great honour to take the time to create you to be the person you are, and because He has cherished you long before you were conceived, even from the moment creation was set into motion and through each moment that He has cared for the whole earth—throughout all of History it has been His bliss to send a saviour to redeem you from all your fears and to dwell in your midst.

So remember, it is His joy to protect and keep you as a part of the faithful remnant; no matter what trouble you have gotten yourself into He is closer than a phone call away and is even more gracious than Randy's father. No matter what He yearns to keep you as His own among His people and in that group to remove your fear of His judgments and even fear of the world so you may go out to them and share this news of His grateful welcome home to each and every one. And all this is possible because He took the honour and pleasure upon Himself to dwell in our midst in the flesh of Christ our Lord and God, to take away our sin and restore us to the Triune God Himself.

So for His great joy, we may respond with ours.

Thank you Lord, Amen.