

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

...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.

As I sit here, snowbound on the farm, I am ever aware of how even a short period in captivity can begin to play with the mind and it has only been four days! What began as a nice respite from the constant busy-ness of life is now, just a few short days later, become a maddening problem—oh to be free! But, while my captivity is due to no fault of my own and does have an end in sight whether it feels like that or not, the people of Israel were in a long captivity in which no end was in sight and it was their own arrogance and hubris, or at least the arrogance and hubris of the kings they demanded from God, that had landed them far away from home, in a strange land, as captives. They were a people in lament. As I said in my message last week, captivity and lament are deep themes of Advent. We are not in bondage to a foreign king, but we are held captive in so many other ways. We are captive to loneliness, to grief, we are held in bondage to old resentments, unhealthy behaviors, anger, worry...the laundry list is so long. Often our hearts and minds are trapped in a lament so long held that it has simply become a part of who we are. We are our pain, we are our own jailers.

Advent is also a time of hopefulness. As God watched the people in anguish, the heart of God could not bear it. Their longing and sorrow penetrated the Holy and God's promise of return was and still is ever present. Advent is a time when, no matter how deep the wound, or disabling the injury, God's longing for us to be free joins with our own, and new things—new acts of grace, the unfreezing of our fears, the release of our shame—are promised. God cannot reach us in our pride or when our strength of will is working against God's hope. When we finally break, we can trust in God's promise and break open to new possibilities, new peace, new understanding. Like Dorothy, who believes she is captive in Oz, the key to the freedom she seeks was hers all along. We too are a people already free, whole and capable of so much joy and love. That is precisely how God formed us. We were born out of God's cosmic explosion of love that was so vast and unstoppable that it is still creating today. Advent reminds us that the unfathomable depths of God's creation contain the seeds of promise. In God's eyes, we are beautiful and perfect. As long as we can still love and have compassion for others, the world, which feels utterly tilted on its axis at times, will right itself. And in the beautiful mystery of God, something unique, something that makes you and the world a better place, can evolve out of our pain. On the Third Sunday of Advent, we have the tradition of lighting a rose candle instead of the blue. God's promise through the prophet Zephaniah is a perfect choice to remind us that into the shadows of life, God's promise of hope and renewal are always breaking in. This rose candle is the visible symbol that tells us that God's joy is always throbbing through creation as a bulwark against our worst fears. This is powerful stuff. This is the Key to the Kingdom, the Ruby Slippers, the road map out of wherever we are held in exile. Advent is our invitation to be restored, set free from shame and whatever ails, and come home to the heart of God's promise. God is still calling: please come home. 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.

Wishing You a Blessed Advent, Stephanie+