

**Leaning In  
Zephaniah 3: 14-20  
Jennie Clark**

Our grandfather clock is chiming again! Several years ago it stopped working. This fall my husband, Steve, and I finally got around to having it repaired. Turns out all it needed was a thorough cleaning. It's a joy hearing the lovely chimes ringing in our home once more. They bring back fond memories of the folks at First Presbyterian Church in Millville NJ, who presented the clock to us as a good-bye gift, when we departed for a new pastoral call in PA.

As much as our hearts fill with joy when we hear those chimes, we've learned that's not the case for everyone. They had a very different effect on a South African woman, Xoliswa Tom, who was a guest in our home after moving to PA. She visited four years after the end to the brutal system of apartheid that disconnected the majority of South Africans from their citizenship and their dignity. When we met Xoliswa, she was traveling to churches in the US, speaking about the work that she and others were doing to empower women in the new South Africa, while still carrying with her the vivid memories of the old South Africa.

When she awoke her first morning with us, I asked if she had slept well. Turns out she didn't, due to the chiming of the clock through the night. The chimes caused disturbing flashbacks for her of the old South Africa; of a time when she was ruthlessly thrown in jail.

At the time of her arrest the community was preparing a big funeral for one of their own, who died at the hands of the apartheid government. His body had been released back to his family, and the community wanted to honor him with dignity in death. The police swept into their community the day of the funeral ordering a halt to everything. At that time it was illegal for the black community to gather in large numbers.

Xoliswa tried to reason with the police, begging them to at least allow the community to gather to eat, so the large quantities of food that they'd prepared wouldn't be wasted. In front of her young children the police grabbed and forcefully threw Xoliswa into the back of the police van with others and took her to jail, where she remained for several days.

No charges were ever made against her, nor did she have access to legal counsel. In jail time moved slowly. Minutes seemed like hours. In the quiet of the night when the streets were empty, she could hear the chimes of the town clock that were drowned out by traffic noises during the day. The chimes of our clock that remind us of a loving congregation, now also remind us of Xoliswa and of her story and the story of her people. I recently Googled Xoliswa Tom's name and discovered that she is now a South Africa Parliament member.

The word of the prophet Zechariah read on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent is a proclamation of joy and celebration: *“Rejoice and exult with all your heart!”* To hear these words apart from the earlier chapters of book of Zechariah, is the difference between hearing the chimes through our ears or through Xoliswa’s.

Zechariah writes of the coming of the Day of the Lord. God’s presence brings both judgment and joy. Preceding the joyful proclamation of God’s restoration in today’s text, the earlier chapters of Zechariah deliver a disturbing message of God’s cosmic judgment against the sins of Israel, Judah and the other nations. He says: *“(It) will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness”* (Zeph. 1:15-16)

Zechariah declares God’s wrath over faithless people who are indifferent towards God, as well as over corrupt priests who give lip service to YHWH, while worshiping idols. He writes in the context of a challenging time in the nation when they are experiencing shame and embarrassment on the international scene. They are under constant threat from the great powers of Babylon, Assyria and Egypt. They are suffering for lack of the necessities of life: food and water.

Into the reality of the grim judgment waiting them, comes Zechariah’s final message of restoration and joy: *“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 . . . The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.”* (Zeph. 3:14) Zechariah announces good news: God who brings judgment will also bring deliverance and restoration.

This is good news for us today as well! There are profound differences between the circumstances of Zechariah’s Israel and our circumstances today. Yet, we have our own challenges and fears into which this joyful message of *God with us* and *the hope of the coming of God’s kingdom* resonate in our hearts as good news.

Zechariah tells us that in God’s kingdom justice will prevail. There will be no more oppressors or oppressed. The lame and outcast will be restored. There will no longer be favored people and nations, nor un-favored people or nations. Corruption will not stand. The scattered and refugees will be gathered and brought home.

I recognize that I live a privileged life. I have not experienced the extreme realities of the people to whom Zechariah wrote. Nor have I experienced the nightmare of apartheid, nor the devastation of famine, nor the desperation of refugees, nor the horror of living in a war zone, nor the dehumanization of racial or ethnic profiling.

I also recognize the importance of tearing down walls that separate me and others like me, who are living lives of privilege, from those who are facing such harsh realities. I recognize the power and the importance of allowing their pain and their stories to touch and shape my own, our own, to teach us how we might unknowingly contribute to unjust systems that harm them. For it is precisely when we are in right relationship with God and with one another, that the kingdom of God will come among us and the words of Zechariah will sing over us: *“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. (Zeph. 3:17)*

Leaning into this vision of joy and exultation for God's people, we then not only *become* good news as we live it out for and with others, but we *receive* the hope that we are seeking in the midst of our own struggles and lives, where we long for the comfort of God's presence with us.

In a former church where I served, we set out a nativity set in the sanctuary during Advent. The baby Jesus was not placed in the set at that time, because he was traveling between the congregation's homes in the weeks leading up to Christmas Eve, when we would carry him into the sanctuary and place him in the manger at the start of the service.

Weeks earlier I delivered the baby Jesus to someone's home, along with a notebook that included instructions, names and addresses of congregation members, scripture and devotional readings, and a place to journal reflections if desired. The person receiving the baby Jesus then delivered him the next day to someone else on the list, and so it went until the last person returned him to the church for Christmas Eve.

I was deeply moved to read the reflections people wrote in the journal. One person wrote that Jesus had arrived on the day when he received a hard diagnosis. Another shared that she'd been feeling very sad and alone, thinking about facing her first Christmas without her beloved husband after his death, when Jesus was delivered to her home. His arrival reminded both of them that God was with them.

"The Advent season walks us forward toward that birth the angels sang. But Zephaniah assures us that God also comes to humanity in the community of faith. God's presence heals, enlivens and challenges us to lean into God's promises for an alternative future. As the PCUSA Confession of 1967 affirms: *'Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in women and men.'*"<sup>1</sup>

So in this third week of Advent let us lean in. Let us enjoy the chimes of the season, but also be willing to hear them through the stories of those who live in the shadows and beyond the borders of our privilege. This Advent let us be reconciled to God and to one another. Maybe you have a spare baby Jesus from your nativity set to share with someone who might welcome his arrival to their home this Advent. Let us carry the hope of Emmanuel, God with us into the lives of hurting people near and far.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Jennifer Ryan Ayres, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 1*, p. 54 (Westminster John Knox Press 2009)