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My father used to take pictures of my sisters and me every year when we were growing up. Each year he would select, with some input from us, what he 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 took down the old picture, selected the new one from all the good photos from the year that had past, and then when the new one, increased to an 8 x 10, was placed on the mantle. Each year the change in our appearance was significant.

I think the albums that contain those 8 x 10 pictures tracing our lives from birth to about 16 or 17 years old are among my parent's most precious possessions because the pictures show our transformation from infancy to young adulthood.

Why do we like pictures? There are probably many reasons, but I think 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.

Our son Greg recently finished a project in school for which he chose to read the Pulitzer Prize winning novel about The Battle of Gettysburg called *The Killer Angels*. 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 of Matthew Brady and other photographers brought the horrors of war from battles such as Gettysburg into American homes for the first time and more graphically than we see today. Ever since technology allowed them to do so – soldiers have also taken pictures of loved ones with them wherever they went.

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 have visited in many homes where such pictures are prominently and poignantly displayed. When I was in seminary, I visited an older woman from church 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 45 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.'"*

I'm sure her friend was trying to be helpful, but what her friend said implied that she and her family didn't need him or that God would take someone from us because God needed them more than we did which isn't necessarily true. Then she began to cry from somewhere deep inside her memory and her loss.

Whenever we speak about God we need to be extremely cautious and humble because those words carry so much weight. I am aware of the fact that this woman may have held onto the friend's statement as a way to try and rationalize or cope with her loss. **But the impact of that was for 45 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 to those left behind.**

This is not a clear picture of God. All of us who take or see pictures know that some 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 a lot of pictures that end up in the garbage in order to get the one that is just right.

Many people have mental pictures of God that should be properly 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 don't change their ways and renew their relationship with the Lord, scholars believe 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, who are forgiven and who no longer need to live in fear.

“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 – listen to all the “I wills.” God is mighty to save. One of the things kids on a playground at recess will argue about is whether or not teams are fair. It isn't fun to play a game if the teams are stacked so one side is sure to win. In the battle of life, however, it is nice to be on the Lord's side because we believe ultimately that God's team is going to win. A coach said of Hall of Fame Alabama football coach “Bear” Bryant that he could beat your team with his guys and he could beat his guys with yours. Whichever side he led, he would 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. This weekend the USS John F. Kennedy, the aircraft carrier named for the nation's 35th president, is in Massachusetts before the ship is decommissioned after nearly 40 years of service. The ship helped start Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and was among the first warships to respond to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, targeting the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. It is hard to

comprehend the size and power of an aircraft carrier. The **82,000-ton ship is 1,052 feet long (more than 3 1/2 football fields long), wider than two football fields and as tall from keel to mast as a 23-story building. It could carry 70 combat aircraft and was served by about 4,600 men and women.**¹ As powerful as an aircraft carrier like Big John is, it is 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, even from harm that is our own responsibility.

2) The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness – the Lord will take great delight in you. The second thing we notice about God in this picture is God's gladness and joy in being in close relationship with us. Many of us carry pictures of loved ones. 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 prodigal sons in Luke 15. The father in that story commutes the sentence that is deserved and instead welcomes the wayward child in 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 rule 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.

3) 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 energy 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

¹ Farewell to a proud warrior - USS John F. Kennedy in last visit to Boston By Megan Tench, The Boston Globe | February 26, 2007

love of God surrounding us in such a way that we know we are safe. When we feel loved and safe in the Lord's embrace, our pulse rate lowers, our breathing deepens, and we know that peace that passes all understanding. This is a good picture of God - might and power, the Lord gladly delighting and rejoicing in God's people, God's peaceful, renewing love. The final part of this picture of God is celebration.

4) 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. I was glad to be able to hear 14 members and friends of the BBC choir singing Amazing Grace and Happy Birthday to Rod MacDonald at Epoch in Brewster on Monday in honor of Rod's 86th birthday. Rod shared how he has sung in many groups over the years, but BBC's has been the most fun. It is 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? We serenade someone when we are trying to win their love (if we can sing anyway). God is trying to win our hearts and our love.

Carol Penfield, who has been leading an exercise class here at BBC, stopped in my office to say hello after the class this week and as we were talking she told me she is playing the role of Tevye's wife Golde in Fiddler on the Roof which is playing at The Academy in Orleans. I replied that it was a great musical, so many good songs, "But do you love me?"

Carol quickly broke into, "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 we will join and sing of our 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.

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

I don't know about you, but that is a God worth knowing, experiencing, and loving.

On Friday, 300 hundred immigrants from 79 countries took the U.S. oath of citizenship in an aircraft hangar on the USS John F. Kennedy in the port of Boston, including seven of its crew members. Electrician's Mate Pamela Leach, who came to the United States from the island of Trinidad and has served 12 years in the Navy said, *"This is just a great opportunity we had as the ship was decommissioning. Not everybody gets to do it like this."*

Becoming a citizen of the United States involves passing a test, pledging to be faithful in a relationship, swearing an oath, and honoring a commitment.

Becoming and being a Christian also involves pledging to be faithful in a relationship, swearing an oath, and honoring a commitment to a God who is **powerful yet tender, loving and delighting in celebration.**

That is a picture of God worth keeping in our wallet, on our mantle, and in our heart.