

His world was devoid of singing. When he sipped his coffee, reading the morning paper, it took every last bit of strength to slowly set that mug on his dining room table. Joseph Rotblat, a Nobel-prize winning physicist, could only hear the trembling of his hands. The chant of war cries seemed to hit a crescendo. It was October 1962, the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis. A moment in time when people looked to the clouds, almost anticipating a mushroom-like shape any minute. People the world over tuned out the music of joy, and sat paralyzed in fear. Joseph called it the “most terrifying moment of (his) life.” Peace seemed like radio static. Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne, two aspiring songwriters, lost their sense for melody. Producers invited them to write a Christmas song at the time when peace and security were at a melancholic low. No one could hear the angels singing “Glory to God in the highest.” The threat of trauma silenced even beautiful and powerful tones like we just heard our Sunday School kids sing. In this backdrop of defeatism, in a space surrounded by enemies of peace, Noel and Gloria wrote a song, inviting the world to hear a peace unlike anything human beings can produce: “Do You Hear What I Hear?” A child who would “bring us goodness and light.” Words covered by thousands of artists since. We may not be on the verge of nuclear war, but as you heard the powerful witness and songs of our young ambassadors in the faith, did you find yourself wondering, if such a song of peace can be real and true for you? Maybe your enemy isn’t a rival soldier, but one you know far more than you wish you did? As we travel through another Christmas season through the barrage of frenzy, pandemic, stress, and struggle, are your internal enemies silencing the song of the Christ-child? Do you hear what God hears?

Such songs of peace seemed hidden as Zephaniah looked out his Jerusalem balcony. A prophet, whose name meant “The Lord has hidden.” It felt like God was hidden. Jerusalem lived in the shadow of the vicious, abusive, and terrifying Assyrian empire. An empire which prided itself in its brutality and silencing. A nation known for oppression and peace-snatching. But it wasn’t just what Zephaniah saw outside his city’s walls, but what he saw inside his people’s hearts. If you happened to walk past the Temple on a Sabbath day, you’d hear what sounded like excited singing, psalms of praise and thanks all around, but internally an enemy was soundproofing their hearts from the songs of their mouths. From Sunday to Friday, some of the same people singing songs to the Lord could be found bowing down to Molech, a false god who called for child sacrifice. The same people rejoicing that the Lord is their shepherd, took advantage of the oppressed and howled the song of injustice. As Zephaniah stared into the evening sun setting over Jerusalem, would his people ever hear what God hears?

Have you ever found such an air of defeatism in your own sunset-gazing? Are you struggling to hear God’s voice singing? I know such a soundscape so well that I could compose its very notes. Maybe you could too? It’s that depressing dirge of never catching a break. As you hear the joy and song of laughter breaking out seemingly all around you this Christmas season, you press your lips together, wondering why your life is so devoid of such melodies of joy? In self-reflection, you reflect, you replay the rambling noises of guilt. Such a track runs on and on, and you fear that one day everyone will know the “real” you, your “real” life soundtrack. Is that what God hears too, when he thinks of me?

Does he see me standing in that “**brood of vipers**” that John called out? Does the Lord stare me down, singing only but a song of judgment? If he hears my life song like I do, does he really have any other musical choice? My album is all the same. It’s irritating. It’s annoying. How often I refuse God’s gifts! How many times have I silenced the fortissimo of his forgiveness! How often I tune out my identity given through the peaceful waters of baptism! Do you hear what I hear? Does your heart, like me, hear songs of suppression, of resignation, of defeat?

What you and I hear is the exact reverse of what God hears, and yet as sinners we selectively hear the belting out of our sins instead of the roaring song of the Lion of Judah. We place the noise-canceling headphones of the world over our ears, and illogically think we can find such peace in a soundless place. We sit in the silenced cell of injustice, hearing only our doubts and discomfort about God’s justice. Can this be all I will ever hear?

Can you imagine your elbows resting on the same balcony railing as Zephaniah, and as you turn toward his face, you see a smile, slowly emerging, like he has a joyful tune ringing in his mind’s ear? Do you hear what he hears? You know it can’t be the voice of the Enemy, the Enemy who wants to silence all God’s people, the Enemy who seeks to silence the voice of the Lord in your heart, the Enemy who wants to cut you off from the sounds of God’s presence. The Enemy heard through abusers. No. There’s life in this lingering tune! You can see Zephaniah’s hands, no longer hanging limp, but ready to be raised up! Do you hear what he hears?

“Sing, O Daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter Jerusalem!” You find yourself caught up in Zephaniah’s music, and as your emotion swells, you pause because you still can’t quite hear the purpose behind such praise. In a brief interlude, you hear the drumming of doubt, the interrogation of injustice, the whisper of “Does God really love me?” But before the beat booms, Zephaniah fills the skies in song, **“The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.”** The perfect Judge, the victorious Warrior, the Bringer of peace and justice, has humbled your most heart-infiltrating enemies! The Lord reigns!

As you begin to mouth these words with Zephaniah, you find yourself looking down over that balcony at a victory parade in your mind’s eye! You see the crowds of the church, you hear the songs of God’s children! As trumpets sound, as dancing covers the street below, you see who is in the heart of the procession, a Child, a newborn. Whose smile and coos somehow ring louder than all the merry-making and joyful noises combined. His song is what our Sunday School kids are reverberating this morning, the jaw-dropping melody that **“the LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.”**

Do you hear what God hears? As you watch this most wonderful of moments, you can’t help but wonder if you really should be able to hear this. Do you really have a place in the song of salvation? But as you grip that balcony railing, expecting to turn and see Zephaniah, you look into the face of Someone you’ve never seen, but he speaks the most familiar voice you’ve ever heard. What you hear next, words are entirely inadequate for detailing.

“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” You listen to the Lion of Judah, the chorus of the King of Kings, the voice of the Victor. He is singing a song of joy over *you!* The songs of your enemies are silenced. Jesus takes great delight in you. In all the majesty of the universe, he has written a song about you. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bursting in harmony over you, because all their work of salvation was worth it, because of you. From God’s vantage point, creation, as wonderful as it is, has no comparison with you. Do you hear what God hears?

With faith-filled ears, you hear your God’s song, the joy he has in you! If God is rejoicing over you and me, if the Lord takes great delight in us, even when we can find nothing delightful in ourselves, if his song of selfless forgiveness has tuned out the dirge of death, how can fear enter our soundscape of life? How can our “**hands hang limp?**” If God is singing such a song over us, how can we not sprint down Zephaniah’s balcony steps and join in this victorious parade, no matter what song of suffering we hear in this life?

By faith in the singing Savior, you hear what God hears! Paul knew about this peaceful and powerful parade too! Even as he heard the rattling of chains and the slamming of cells, he joined in the Lord’s song, “**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**” When you hear God’s song, and how it overcomes all the noises of life, you hear the unseeable truth. Unseeable, but you hear it wherever you go: “**The Lord is near.**” The Lord is at your side, singing to you through the Scriptures, showing you the soundtrack of life that is yours by faith: Hope in anxiety, peace that transcends struggle, victory even in defeat. Do you hear what God hears?

As you hear his song, respond in the song of prayer. Bring your songs of sadness, your chorus of criticism, your melody of melancholy. Tune out the songs of self-preservation, defeatism, and hopelessness. Reflect on the songs of our Sunday School children, through whom the Lord is singing to us today. Sing to the Lord a new song! Sing the good news like John the Baptizer!

When the soundwaves of your mind and heart echo with regret and anger, when you can’t hear past the intonations of injustice, when you feel like the silence of numbness is all you will ever get to listen to, hear what God hears. Seek out the song of the Scriptures. Stand at the balcony of Zephaniah again. Hear the Word made flesh who sang creation into being, who now and always sings over you, who comes near to you, who takes great delight in you. Amen.