

“What God Sings”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

This is the time of year to be merry. The lights twinkle and the kids are sugared up on Christmas M&Ms and gingerbread monstrosities. We're here today lighting the joy candle— it's pink of course. So festive. We pontificate on the difference between happiness and joy. We've heard before that happiness is fleeting. Merry & bright for the season but fades in the new year, perhaps. Joy is lasting and persevering— unfazed by circumstance.

This year in advent we have practiced the joy of waiting/seeking through the seemingly paradoxical practices of reverence and celebration. We've ended each service so far with a celebration where we sing and pass out Christmas cookies. Maybe that's just merriness or happiness that isn't lasting. Or maybe it's a reminder of the joy in seeking after the right things... it's an entryway into the celebration Zephaniah imagines... where we, the body of Christ, celebrate... and God calms us with love and sings for us. And we in our searching this advent and waiting on the right things

recognize the joy that comes and the sweetness that is the joy of waiting and searching after the right things.

Zephaniah is another short prophetic work. It consists of 9 oracles within its 3 chapters. 8 of those 9 oracles predict disaster. He predicts disaster for Judah and pretty much all nations. It's a pretty dark outlook. But, the one oracle that does not predict disaster is the one we read today. After all the doom and gloom Zephaniah ends with a song of joy. The book is written during the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century BCE. King Josiah is known as a good and faithful king. Perhaps, one of the greatest kings Judah ever had — he's on par with David in some ways. Josiah instituted reforms that sought to strengthen the kingdom's connection to the law of Moses. Zephaniah thought all that was great, but too late.

The people had been bowing down to other gods. There was lots of political corruption. No one seemed to have any sense of right and wrong. The nation had

become shallow and materialistic. The people were indifferent and apathetic spiritually. They thought God would do what God would do — God has nothing to do with their lives on earth. God is off in the heavens. Zephaniah describes a world in trouble— a world of trouble that we could probably recognize. He describes the pride and selfishness that ruin the best efforts of humankind. And yet, after all this the prophet ends with joy.

Zephaniah says: *Sing, daughter Zion. Sing and dance. Celebrate God's presence.* Because in celebrating God's presence you begin to see God's presence and it's hard to be apathetic about something you see and experience for yourself. Zephaniah goes further. God sings and dances. God's loving kindness calms the people. The prophet pictures God breaking out into song in the midst of the festival. God is celebrating a reunion with us.

There's not much here to suggest that Judah or the other nations have done anything to change their ways. There's not a part of this oracle that says something like, "And the people changed their ways and weren't selfish anymore..." No, that's not really

the message we get. In the end there's just an oracle of grace. God sings over us— just as we are. That doesn't mean we don't need to change... we do. What's happening in this song of God is the finishing of creation. It's the festival celebrating what God has done and what festival is complete without the host singing?

Our reading today is filled with joy. But, it's important that we recognize the context. This joy is set within the context of a world in turmoil. This joy recognizes that deeper than any brokenness within us or around us is a joy waiting to be expressed. That's why we read this in Advent— it's the hope that anchors us. The preacher Brett Younger says, "Real joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God's presence." In Zephaniah though the world seems to be falling apart — God is rejoicing simply because God is with those he loves. Joy springs from the moment of the reunion of our true self and the God who created us.

There was a kid in my youth group years ago at another church— let's call him Nick— who was all too aware of his own shortcomings. He was an only child in a family of

high achieving parents. His parents were successful. And Nick was extremely bright— excelled in school. But, he had trouble finding his place and feeling like he could ever live up to the potential he perceived others to think he had. A few years ago, his personal life and his career fell apart at the same time. And he says he never lost sight of the many blessings in his life— these were the things that were supposed to bring happiness (right?); but rather than being comforted by them, he felt mocked, like he had been cursed with incredible potential that would never would be fulfilled. When he was younger he felt that doing well in school was how he validated himself... now he found himself without that sense of worth. He thought: Where can I find validation now?

He finally realized he couldn't make it on his own. He went to a therapist. And in that safe place where he was able to speak openly and be vulnerable he began to make some progress. In conversation with someone who had no expectations (except honesty) he was able to make some progress. He said, "After the first session, I broke down in my car, laughing and crying like a

maniac. It's paradoxical... I was able to rejoice in the most painful moments of my life just by naming my struggles and for once being myself." That's the reunion that uncovers joy.

Leonard Cohen famously wrote, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." It's a reminder that it's not our perfection that brings joy... it's not perfecting ourselves from some outside measure to validate us. But, discovering who God made us to be, uncovering that sacred creature and being brave enough to share that precious vulnerability with your neighbor. That's how presence brings hope... that's where joy comes from. Those who truly love you love you because of, not despite, your flaws. Those who love you want you to take off your masks and be yourself. Those who love you don't want you to be someone else. This is what it means to "show up". Show up and be who God made you to be. If God shows up and you're not there, you're going to miss it. You're going to miss the joy of God's presence. God doesn't sing for joy at us being someone else— but becoming fully invested in who God created us to be. That means we don't have to deny the struggle

within us or the brokenness of our family or the violence and corruption of the world. It's not our job to 'fix' others, but open ourselves to who God is creating us to be. Jesus said it like this: deny yourself— deny self within you that wants only to please others— deny that self and follow me. "The Lord has removed all judgement," says Zephania. God sings for you.

There's an old story told about St. Francis of Assisi. He was traveling with his assistant, Brother Leo. It was winter and they were freezing. Francis called to Leo: "Brother, if it were to please God that the friars should give a great example of holiness throughout the world that would not be perfect joy."

As they walked along shivering Francis added: "If we should make the lame to walk, chase away demons, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and raise the dead after four days, this would not be perfect joy." Francis kept adding to this litany, describing places where perfect joy would NOT be found— through all these seemingly good works. Finally Brother Leo blurted out: "Where is perfect joy found?"

Francis said, "I thought you'd never ask. If, when we shall arrive at our destination, all drenched with rain and trembling with cold, all covered with mud and exhausted from hunger; if, when we knock at the convent gate and doorman angrily asks us who we are; if, after we have told him, 'We are two of the brethren,' he should answer angrily, 'You're liars. You are two impostors stealing from the poor.' If he refuses us and leaves us outside in the freezing snow, suffering from cold and hunger all night, then, if we bear all this with patience and joy, thinking of the sufferings of our Blessed Lord, which we would share out of love for him, O Brother Leo, that is perfect joy. Above all the graces and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ grants to his friends, is the grace of overcoming oneself, and accepting willingly, out of love for Christ, all suffering, injury, discomfort and contempt. So that through this we might know the truth of the apostle's words— "God forbid that I should boast about anything except for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through him, and I have been crucified to the world."¹

Does that sound like joy? Francis used this parable like Jesus used parables. It's jarring. It's meant to stop us in our tracks — turn everything upside down. That's what John the baptist meant when he said repent— think again. We are never going to find joy simply satisfying our base needs and satisfying everyone else's expectations of us. If our lives are completely centered around our ego needs then we have not yet done the work Jesus calls us to do — “pick up your cross and follow” or “lose your life to find it.” This alternative gold of the gospel is a challenge, but it is exactly what we need to hear. All of our attempts at securing safety, self-gratification, and belonging are the fig leaves we use to cover our nakedness.

We can't bear the sound of God's voice because we don't know the one for whom he sings. This is the season to return, repent. By entering into our own darkness we find the wholeness of the one whose light pierces every darkness. This is the paradoxical truth of the season— our imperfections are reasons for joy... our humbling ourselves leads to acclamation from God... and as always death leads to life. What we find in this season is a

vulnerable child who changes everything— changes the way we think about God. God is not some cosmic rule-keeper. God is not some holy counter— counting up all your wrongs and rights. God is the creative life force— or what we call 'love.' And love is what is left over when everything else is stripped away. That's what we find at the manger... it is what comes true at the cross. And in the darkest part of the year— we celebrate the coming the light. It seems sometimes that it comes out of nowhere. In the midst of all the troubles in the world, God surprises us with joy.

Sue Wyatt was a popular Methodist bible teacher in Florida. Every fall, Sue would work her way through North Florida and South Georgia going church to church leading retreats and classes. One year, she felt God leading her to teach about joy. All spring and summer she studied everything she could find on joy. But the more she prepared, the less joy she felt. She went on and did the retreats. She spoke every weekend about joy. People who knew her would ask, "Sue, are you alright? You don't seem yourself this year!" And she would always say the same thing, "I'm fine! Everything is fine!"

But she knew it wasn't. She finished early in December and she was exhausted. She wondered if she would ever teach again.

That December, Sue went Christmas shopping with her daughter. Her daughter noticed something was wrong. "Mother," she said, "is everything alright? You're not yourself. What's wrong?" "Nothing's wrong," Sue would say. "I'm fine. Why does everyone keep asking that?" They were in a grocery store getting groceries, and her daughter said, "Mother, you finish here, and I'll run next door to the drugstore, and we'll meet up there." Sue finished the grocery shopping and took everything to the car. And as she was walking to the drugstore, she encountered a Salvation Army fellow ringing a bell. As she walked beside him, he put the bell in her hand, and said, "You are to have this bell. It will bring you joy." She thought he was asking her to do his job. She said, "Excuse me. I'm in a hurry"--fished out a dollar bill from her purse and gave it to him. He said, "No, Ma'am, you are to have this bell; it will bring you joy." She said, "I'm meeting my daughter. I'm busy" He said, "Lady, take the bell." She took the bell as she entered the store and she rang

it. When she turned back to see the man, he was gone. She went through drugstore ringing that bell. She went up and down the aisles ridiculously ringing the bell. Her feet became lighter; she laughed to herself. People gave her odd looks, some smiled. Suddenly, as she turned the corner, she came face-to-face with her daughter. "Mother, what on earth are you doing? Have you lost your mind?" "No," said Sue. "I haven't lost my mind; I think I've FOUND my joy!" The next morning Sue called the Salvation Army to return the bell. They said, "Ma'am, we don't give away bells." They also told her that they had no record that there was a kettle at that drugstore that night.² Sometimes God surprises us with joy... singing for the joy of salvation... at just the moment we need it.

¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/brother-francis-what-perfect-joy>

² From Davis Chappell in sermon "A Prophet's Joy" http://day1.org/5369-a_prophets_joy