

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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*Third Sunday of Advent*  
Zephaniah 3:14-20

### **Living the Joy of God's Love**

One of the hallmark themes of this season each year is joy. And this year, on this third Sunday in Advent—just a little over a week from Christmas—it seems fitting that we would turn our attention to this very positive, this very upbeat, this very sparkling word that is also a state of being: joy.

While joy is not a theme exclusively for this season, it certainly permeates it in that it is all around us. Joy is in the messages that we send to one another. Joy is conveyed in the spirit of giving and receiving. Joy is at the center of our prayers. And joy is in our music and singing. This is perhaps most clearly referenced in Christmas carols like “Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!”

One aspect of joy that makes it particularly delightful is that there is a bit of a surprise element to it. Joy is at its fullest when it arrives at a time or moment not precisely anticipated.

Another part of joy that makes it special is that it is not the norm. That joy enters the picture or scene unannounced or unexpectedly simply adds to the burst of positivity when it does appear.

But before I go on any further about all this positivity, we have to pause and consider just what kind of joy we're referencing from our faith perspective. It must be acknowledged that joy like many other facets of our Christian faith can be robbed of its fullness of meaning when it is watered down and cheapened—when it is relegated to simply a nice word or idea that no more than elicits a warm and shallow sentimentality. When this happens joy is reduced from the profound magnitude associated with it in its fullness. Joy in this diluted state is akin to the superficial smile that is pasted on to cover up a deeper angst and despair that lies beneath it.

When it comes to the Bible, there are many places within its pages that reference joy—either joy that is promised or as joy that has already manifested itself in a particular time and place. In this advent season, a number of the scripture passages we read have joy as a central theme or thrust as something that is promised.

One of the very basic Bible study techniques is to pay attention when something is mentioned more than a few times. So if there is something that is set forth as a need for a change to come, we can infer that the change that is coming is something lacking in the here and now.

In this case then, all this talk of joy—especially joy to come—is uttered in a time when it very well was lacking or at least is in short supply. And those to whom the promise is made are the ones mostly likely in need of hearing it.

My friends, it will not be news to you to hear this morning of the despair and lack of joy in our world today. It is incumbent upon us as full members of our world who are also Christians—people of faith—to not only acknowledge this despair, but to also embrace it so that we might become agents of the needed change to come.

Despair comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Common to all despair is a disconnectedness. This disconnectedness can be between people themselves or disconnectedness between people and the earth.

Anytime there is warfare there is a profound despair that results when the two sides of the war have become so alienated from one another that the violence and horror of war result. But the outbreak of war itself is not the only way this despair is displayed. Anytime that there is saber-rattling and threats of war or coercion of any kind between nations or peoples are also symptomatic of a brokenness that belies community.

A quick online search reveals that there are over 40 armed conflicts or wars underway today as we speak. So destructive are these conflicts that well over 100,000 lives have been lost in just this year of 2018. And many of these wars have been going on for decades. Take the war in Afghanistan for example, that has been underway for 17 years and counting.

When people become divided from one another, when differences are highlighted as a way to separate, to segment and to sequester, despair is also the result.

When we are made to be fearful of one another, when those who are perceived to be different are vilified and blamed, despair is the result.

When this despair is all around us, we long to hear a word of encouragement.

During these Sundays of Advent this year, we have been taking a closer look at some of the prophets of the Old Testament whose words are read in this time of anticipation and of preparation for the coming of Christ on Christmas.

Today we have read some words from a prophet named Zephaniah. This is one of those really little books in the back of the Hebrew Bible. This one takes up just 3 pages. But there are a couple of notable things to say about Zephaniah that bear on what we're talking about today.

The first is about who this Zephaniah himself might have been. I say "might have been," since there is so little to go on in what we have in the text. One tidbit we do have is in the very first part of the first verse. "The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi . . ." Scholars have speculated that this name Cushi is likely of Egyptian or Ethiopian origin meaning that Zephaniah himself might be of African decent. This in itself, if true, is a bridge of sorts across not just continents but cultures as well, bringing together diverse peoples of the ancient world. This is one of those tidbits that can change the way we understand the scope of the Hebrew Bible's reach.

The second thing to note about Zephaniah is that of all the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, this is the one that is filled with the most intense doom and gloom of them all. Here's how Zephaniah begins his book. "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord." (Zeph. 1:2-3)

And just a few verses later, "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good nor will he do harm.' their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste." (Zeph. 1:12-13a)

And Zephaniah is just getting started here leading to even more intensity of his calling out the people for their divisions and distinctions that have led to a loss of interconnectedness. In a nutshell, Zephaniah, a man of faith, has concluded that God's total and complete punishment is more than deserved by the people of the time.

It's this situation of utter decay and doom into which the final words of Zephaniah's prophecy spring forth in a shockingly surprising way that leads to a total and complete reversal. Totally out of left field come these words. "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more." (Zeph. 3:14-15)

These are words that truly result in a deep and profound joy in that they come totally unexpectedly. It is out of the sheer grace of God that this 180-degree change of heart is expressed by God's prophet. For let us remember that the most basic definition of a prophet is one who is the mouthpiece of God, who is speaking God's word to God's people.

Professor Robert A. Bennett puts it this way, "Nevertheless, the word that ultimately came to this prophet of doom was more about the future than about the past, and more about those who will inherit the future than about those who will be punished. It is the faithful who rejoice and—perhaps most shocking—it is the God who commutes judgement sentences who also rejoices among those who have been released to live another day and in another way." (*The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VII*, ©1996 by Abingdon Press, p. 703)

What he says about Zephaniah's word can also be said even more so about what God is doing in the incarnation that we celebrate in which God becomes flesh and dwells among us. ". . .it is the God who commutes judgement sentences who also rejoices among those who have been released to live another day and in another way." (*ibid.*)

My friends—sisters and brothers in Christ—that's you and me. We're the ones whose judgment sentences have been commuted by the amazing grace of God. What joy that is for us to accept and embrace as we go about our living in this world of division and despair. It is you and me and all those whom God has come to transform in this Christmas event, who are called to first rejoice and then to go forth into the world as God's emissaries of good news.

When we fully encompass this new reality, the joy we feel and experience is truly profound leading us to embrace as our own the words that the apostle Paul penned to the Philippians. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:4-7)

May it be so leading us to the fullness of living the joy of God's love.