

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSV)

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

[15] 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.

[16] On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

[17] 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
[18] as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

[19] 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.

[20] 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.

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. [6] Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

JOY SUNDAY

Rejoice! I will say it again. Rejoice.

That sounds like an appropriate text for the season. That's what the Christmas season is all about isn't it? It's about rejoicing and light and figgy pudding. Have any of you actually had any figgy pudding?

Never mind. It's part of the tradition. It's a part of the festive season. Rejoice! Again I say rejoice.

Despite my best efforts to introduce a more reflective, even penitential mood into our Advent worship the time has come to welcome joy into our service. In the midst of all these purple candles, today we light a pink one.

(Actually it's supposed to be a rose colored candle, but it looks pink to me.)

The tradition comes from France. In Latin the first line of our lesson for today goes, "Gaudete in Domino semper." (Translation: Rejoice in the Lord always.) So, this third Sunday of Advent represented a break from the more sober reflections that had gone before. And it became known as Gaudete Sunday.

There's joy as we anticipate the coming of a Savior. Even in Advent we sing, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!" And as we enter the Christmas season the message intensifies as we sing Joy to the World and Good Christian Folk, Rejoice. With the shepherds we hear good news. Unto us a Savior is born. Rejoice!

JOY AND SORROW

But, as a pastor I come to this season of rejoicing with trepidation. I know from personal experience that many don't experience the holiday season as a time to rejoice. You see, negative emotions can be heightened in a festive season. For some it seems like everyone seems to be rejoicing except me. I'm the only one left in this lonely wilderness.

It's not true of course. I would estimate that fifty to seventy percent of the people in every congregation I have served experienced significant psychological distress during this season. Each year I hear the same line from a variety of people, "If I can just make it through the holidays" Why does this season of good tidings and great joy create pain for so many?

We say that Jesus is the "reason for the season," but I'm afraid that has never really been true. The Christmas season has always been like a giant layer cake. The base for the cake for many of us is the miracle of the incarnation. God is with us. The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

But, over the years that base was soon covered over by layers of tradition and nostalgia. The Christian message was superimposed upon pagan holidays and practices. Thoughts about the little baby Jesus and his family become fused with thoughts about our own family or the family we would like to have.

So, when we celebrate Christmas it is not just a celebration of faith but a celebration of family as well. And therein lays the problem.

What if we don't like our family? Suppose our family is broken? What if we are struggling with grief or guilt? Suppose we are separated from the ones we love?

What's that old song? I'll be home for Christmas. But, suppose that doesn't happen? Suppose that fervent hope is (as the song puts it) only in our dreams?

Many of us feel like in one way or another that we are in exile when it comes to Christmas. Others say to us, "Have a merry Christmas. Rejoice in the Lord always."

And we want to reply, “Please, do you have to rub it in?”

For those that struggle the calls to “rejoice always” sound kind of like that empty headed reggae song from a few years ago. “Don’t Worry Be Happy” the singer said. That might be easy for someone on a chemical high, but for those of us who live in the real world it’s not so easy.

I love Charles Dickens’ tale, “A Christmas Carol” because it tells the truth about Christmas for many of us. The ghost of Christmas past haunts not only Ebenezer Scrooge but us as well.

The ghost of Christmas present fills us with regret and longing. And the ghost of Christmas future is a fearful specter that we would rather not think about at all.

No wonder we struggle so much when the holiday season rolls around. If only we can make it through the holidays, then we’ll be okay. We hope.

HOLIDAY GREETINGS FROM CELL BLOCK D

But, Paul’s call to rejoice all the time is not the rash advice of one who did not know the reality of struggle. Do you remember what we said last week about what was going on in Paul’s life when he wrote his letter to the Philippians?

He was in prison. Paul was not on easy street when he wrote this passage. He was on cell block D! And when he said “Rejoice in the Lord always ... again I say rejoice” people took note. If Paul can rejoice in his situation, maybe I can rejoice in mine. If Paul has found hope in his exile, perhaps I can find hope in mine.

We are not always free to determine what happens to us. But, we are free to determine how we respond to whatever happens. Remember Paul said that this was the secret to being truly content in life. In this same letter to the Philippians he wrote that he was content no matter what the circumstance in his life.

He might have a lot or he might have a little. That didn't matter. What mattered was the Lord was with him and that gave him strength for the living of his days.

Paul didn't just tell us to rejoice in an empty headed unreflective way. He told us to "rejoice in the Lord always." And that message was so important, he repeated it. Again I say "rejoice."

The key phrase, the one that often overlook is the phrase "in the Lord." In order to experience true joy in this holiday season we have to dig our way through all the layers of tradition and nostalgia and remember the reason for the season. It is not about parties and gift giving or even family.

It is more important and more enduring than that. The season is a celebration of the fact that God is with us. The season is about salvation that comes from above and meets us where we live. The season is about a deep down trust. This season is about a sense of contentment that will not go away even when everything else is taken away.

Even when life itself is taken away, the joy and the hope remain.

A SEASON OF FOREBEARANCE

And that hope shows in the way we treat others. Paul said that if we "rejoice in the Lord always" we will be patient with others. He wrote, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

That word translated "gentleness" can also be translated "forbearance, goodwill, or friendliness." If ever there was a word we need to hear as the Christmas season progresses, it is that word "forbearance." We need to learn how to approach the emotionally charged encounters of Christmas with a gentle spirit, accepting others with the same spirit with we are accepted in Christ.

If the joy of the season escapes you, I have a suggestion. Instead of trying to think your way into a new way of acting, try to act your way into a new way of thinking. Treat others graciously and you might find the grace to rejoice in your own heart. The emotion of joy begins with acts of compassion and love.

Someone who has experienced great sorrow told me that in order to keep from getting too far down in the depths of depression, she made it a point to keep active ... to do things with and for the people she loved ... even when she didn't feel like it. And over time she acted her way into a new way of feeling.

The Psalmist said that "Weeping may linger for the night but joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5) In other words joy comes when we open ourselves up to the possibilities of a new day; the new day that God in Christ can bring us.

The only way out of the downward spiral is to summon up the courage to continue the journey. God has a plan and a purpose for our life. Just as Christ was born in Bethlehem, we can be reborn through the power of His Spirit. God himself is with us here and now. Salvation comes from upon high to all people, especially those people who are alone and afraid. In the darkest night the brilliant light shines, and the hope is proclaimed.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice.

AN ANXIOUS SEASON

Of course, even when we rejoice in the Lord's gracious salvation and act graciously toward others, we are still sometimes plagued by nagging doubts and fears.

Have you ever awakened in the middle of the night with your mind going full blast? It happens to me from time to time. It's as if I haven't gone to sleep.

All those things that I was worried about before I went to bed were apparently whirling along in my subconscious until they force their way into my waking thoughts. And for me, during this busy season it happens more often.

In the midst of this season of stress Paul tells us, "Don't worry. Don't be anxious."

But, just saying "no" doesn't seem to work when it comes to anxiety.

That's especially true at Christmas when it seems like there's more to do than there is time to do it. We have to prepare for guests, services of worship and social events. There are presents to buy and food to prepare.

It can be fun to expect all those things, but it can be draining as well. We suffer from holiday overload and the anxieties mount. According to this passage, we can keep anxiety from robbing our joy by taking our concerns to the Lord.

We can't overcome anxiety by just denying that it exists. Instead, we name those things that make us anxious and take them to the Lord in prayer. And then we leave those anxiety producing concerns with the Lord. I know. It sounds so obvious, so easy.

But, many of us just won't do it. Many of us gulp down anxiety like a vacuum cleaner sucks in dirt. Many of us are anxiety magnets. If we don't have enough worries in our own life, we'll take on the worries of someone else.

MANAGING ANXIETY

Now it is important to be concerned and compassionate toward others. The apostle Paul, despite all his brave talk about "having no anxiety" was anxious about the needs of others. He was especially anxious about the things that happened to the churches that he founded.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he talked about all the pressure he felt daily because of his anxiety he had for the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:28) Paul may have told the Philippians not to have anxiety about anything, but at least this one verse suggests that he had trouble practicing what he preached!

And I am in the same boat. I know that it's not good to dwell upon problems, but from time to time I am anxious. I'm anxious about my parishioners. I'm anxious about some of my own problems. I'm anxious about the problems that plague friends and family. Anxiety is a reality, a daily pressure that all of us face. We will never eliminate anxiety, at Christmas or at any other time of the year for that matter.

If you want a life of unengaged serenity, Christianity is not your religion.

Jesus was up to his neck with the needs of humanity (in fact that's what the incarnation is all about), and anyone who follows Jesus will find themselves in the same predicament. Anxiety cannot be eliminated from our life. The faithful disciple of Jesus often is put into anxiety provoking situations.

And even if it were possible to eliminate anxiety from our lives, I'm not sure that it would be a good idea. Anxiety can play an important role in keeping faith awake and moving.

But, we can and must learn to manage it.

Anxiety should not have the last word in our lives. Anxiety must not become obsessive and self-destructive.

And so we take our concerns to the Lord in prayer.

We learn to manage anxiety by praying about it and making our requests to God.

But, there is another step which makes our prayers much more effective.

THANKSGIVING

We manage anxiety by bathing our requests to God with an attitude of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the key.

Verse six reads in its entirety,

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Philippians 4:6

I think this means that for every request we make of God we need to think of a blessing that God has already given us. Try it. For every request you make of God, find a reason to thank God. I think you'll find that your spiritual life will be enlivened by this practice.

Thanksgiving comes before Christmas on the calendar, and thanksgiving must come before Christmas in our hearts as well. If we are to rejoice in good times and bad, if we are to trust in the presence and promises of God, we must cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving ... all year long.

The greatest prayer in the world is to see the sun rise and say with tears in our eyes, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Gratitude has a way of enhancing the blessings that we have, diminishing our fears and pointing us toward a new future. Gratitude encourages us to be gracious toward others, and gratitude motivates a life of service.

Requests made to God without thanksgiving are often nothing more than an expression of our own fears. Requests made to God with thanksgiving are powerful expressions of faith and love.

I know that many of you have lost a lot this year. It's good for you to talk about your concerns and fears. It's also good for you to bring your anxiety to the Lord in prayer.

But, it's also important for you to remember your blessings as well. Give thanks and rejoice in the Lord. In good seasons and bad, give thanks and rejoice.

And you may be surprised at the joy that will come into your life ... even in the dark times.

A PEACE THAT PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING

"Surprised by joy", C.S. Lewis used that phrase to describe how salvation came into his life. It was a joyful surprise. It was not what he expected.

Have you ever noticed how the unexpected gift often is the best gift of all? We didn't expect it. We didn't even know that we wanted it. But, it brought us joy.

That's how it is with God's grace as revealed in Jesus. It is an unexpected joy. It is a peace and a hope that transcends our understanding.

That's how Paul closes our passage for today. He told the Philippians that if they lived with joy and thanksgiving, if they brought their concerns to God in prayer and left them there, their life would be changed in a surprising way.

They would be protected by the peace of God. Verse seven reads, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

There are two things that I want you to notice about God's peace in this verse.

First of all, it is a peace that "surpasses all understanding." That means God's peace is not dependent upon circumstances.

We can all feel peaceful when the sun is shining and the birds are singing. But, if we feel peace in a time of fear and uncertainty, if we feel peace when the clouds are dark and the rain beats down, then that is a peace that surpasses all understanding. It doesn't make sense to be peaceful in those circumstances.

But, with God it is possible. Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus can still the storm in our life as well.

And second I want you to note that peace has a purpose. This divine peace is meant to be a guard for your life. God's peace is like a sentry. In fact that's what the word in Greek means.

The message of the incarnation is that God stands watch over our lives. The peace of God comes to earth. God is involved in the world, the whole world. And God is a part of your world.

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Zephaniah was written in a time of defeat and discouragement. Most of the book is a woeful prediction of judgment and destruction.

And yet, like so many of the prophetic books it does not end that way. Zephaniah dared to proclaim along with Isaiah, “Your God reigns!” And because of that carnival breaks out in the middle of a funeral procession.

The words of the prophets are an important part of our Christmas celebration. They were very realistic about the unfaithfulness of the people, and they brought a word of judgment. But, judgment was not the only word. There was also a powerful message of hope. Judgment would not be the final word. Salvation was on the way.

Many of the hopeful words of the prophets are echoed in Handel’s Messiah. Each year at Christmas we hear phrases like, “Comfort, ye my people,” “And he shall reign forever and ever.”

The Hallelujah Chorus is from Revelation. One commentator described the message of that book as, “... words that come to us from a poor persecuted church that was hanging on by its fingernails on the fringes of the Empire.”

But, despite their situation, they had a hope that still gives us hope even today.

And so today we rejoice. We read the words of the prophet, who said, “Sing and shout for joy ... Rejoice with all your heart ... the Lord ... is with you.

There is no reason to be afraid ... The time is coming! I will bring your scattered people home.”

That’s the real wonder and mystery of Christmas. God will bring his scattered people home. God will give us a peace that passes all understanding. God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And that’s why it is important that we celebrate each and every year. My friends today is the Sunday when we celebrate, and (as they would say on Sesame Street) the word for today is joy.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN