

Zephaniah 3: 14-20
Philippians 4: 4-7
December 13, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent

This morning we celebrate “joy Sunday.” This is to be expected in one way; and yet it is odd in another. On the one hand we may think that every day this time of year is a joyful day. After all we are preparing for the birth of Jesus! We are preparing to celebrate the arrival of “good news of a great joy which shall be to all people.” And yet as Christians who honor the traditions of two thousand years, we are in a season called Advent. It is a season of humble awareness that joy is in contrast to painful experience. Joy is in contrast to grief, fear, guilt, remorse, anger, resentment, jealousy and the desire for revenge. Joy is incompatible with prejudice, greed, abuse of power oppression and injustice. In short, joy has a context as light has the context of darkness. In olden days we Christians had a one word description for this context: sin.

So far during Advent we have heard about faith, hope and love. But we have also heard about judgment, refining fire and root canals. We have been invited to recognize that even we good people have impurities in our souls that God wishes to burn away. We know what they are because they the things we keep under wraps and do not want anyone to know lest they realize what horrible and corrupt people we are. They are that within us which cringes behind our shining exterior. They are that which we deem unforgivable even, and perhaps especially by God.

So it is that joy has a context. Joy is not the outcome of pathological denial—the painting of a yellow happy face on sadness, shame and disappointment. It is not what passes for joy during the holiday season.

The heading for the reading from the prophet Zephaniah in my Bible is “a Song of Joy.” And indeed it is a wonderful and beautiful song. Yet if you dare to read the whole of the third chapter you will find that that almost every word leading up to that song is one of judgment. Judah is about to be punished severely for abandoning God. Jerusalem is called a “soiled and defiled city. It has listened to no voice. It has accepted no correction. It has not trusted the Lord. It has not drawn near to its God.” As a result terrible days are ahead. However a remnant will be spared who hear Zephaniah’s words and repent, draw near to God and listen to him. *Then comes the song of joy.*

The setting for the Apostle Paul’s call to rejoice is prison. Paul is in chains. He does not know from one day to the next whether he will be released or executed. The letter to the Philippians is powerful because it reveals what true joy is. It is the cry of joy in the midst of suffering. Thus it is that Paul not only rejoices himself but calls upon the Philippians to join him.

So what is this joy that we are meant to find in the midst of a world full of violence and uncertainty? What is this joy we are meant to exhibit in a world where it seems that our lives could end abruptly at any time or place? What is this joy that lives in the midst of sorrow and even transcends it?

The key lies in Zephaniah. Having announced the fearful future Zephaniah is inspired to cry with joy:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! He has turned away

your enemies. The (true) King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst,
you shall fear disaster no more!

God has not changed his mind. Disaster is still coming. But God is *in the midst of* his people. The ones who recognize this and turn to God: they *will fear disaster no more*. Because the day is coming when:

I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. 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*.

God calls the people to be people of joy in the midst of terrible times. Yet this is no manufactured joy or false optimism. The joy of Zephaniah and the joy of Paul is utterly realistic. The world is a dark place. There is real horror and real uncertainty. The truth is that the world is no more uncertain since the shootings at San Bernardino than before. The world is not and never has been a safe place. As Woody Guthrie observed, "No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never make it out of this world alive." This one point on which and atheists and people of faith agree. Yet for Christians, Jesus teaches over and over for us not to seek security and happiness in this life. Thus in John he says, "In this world you face all kinds of trouble and persecution. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33)

True joy comes from looking reality straight in the eye and calling it what it is *and knowing that there is a deeper true reality that we are truly safe in the heart of God. In Jesus Christ God calls us home*. Joy is not about God making what is bad all better. Joy is about the faith that in Jesus Christ God has *already made it better! In Christ the deep reality of life is not suffering and death. It is...life!*

Joy is what happens when we find ourselves deep in worry and fear, and then we remember, I am safe in the arms of God. Life is still often painful and difficult. Darkness is still darkness. What is different is that we know that nothing can ultimately steal the love and security we have in God. That is why with Paul, we can sing! Amen.