

ADVENT 3 – 12/12/21

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

God, as we come to you in prayer this morning we are first and foremost grateful. We thank you for this place, for this congregation, for this chance to come together and worship, to sing and pray, to hear the gospel – the good news – of your love, your peace, your joy brought to this earth by your son, Jesus. We're grateful for this season of waiting... for humanity to grasp the depth of your love...this season of remembering... your goodness and steadfastness ... this season of anticipating...your kingdom, coming in its fullness.

We thank you for the gift of new life, for the safe arrival of Sage Noella to Ryan and Amanda Janzen. We ask that you would be with them and Nora as they adjust to a new member of the family. Be also with Marlin and Sheri and great-grandma Lois as their family expands.

We thank you for the gift of marriage and the public commitment made last evening by Carson Sterk and Leah Booten as they celebrated their new life together. Bless them and their families also as they adjust and support one another.

God, we ask for your presence, your peace and comfort for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. We pray for the family and friends of Joan Boyer as they remember and celebrate her life. We pray for the families of the young people who were killed in the school shooting in Michigan. We pray for those affected by the huge storm system that swept through so many parts of the country bringing severe weather swings, damage and death, particularly in those areas of Kentucky that were so hard-hit. Oh, Lord, it seems that the earth itself is grieving and groaning. We are the stewards of the earth – help us to listen carefully to the messages nature is sending.

We pray for healing, God – healing for the earth, for damaged relationships, healing for minds that are ill and hearts that are broken. We pray for those whose bodies need healing. We think especially of Leona this morning as she's in the hospital having various tests and appointments as the doctors try to understand what's happening for her. Give her courage and comfort. Give the doctors wisdom. Be with Norman as he spends his days at Leona's side. Grant him safe travels and adequate rest. God, we thank you for healing that has come – for Judy Unruh, through physical therapy and good care at Bethesda. And for Liz Unruh, Judy Goertzen's mother as her health has stabilized. We thank you for healing and new life that will be given by donors at the blood mobile tomorrow. We thank you for the ways that people's spirits will be lifted and healed as the Brass Choir and Elbiata play and sing tonight. We ask for your blessing, God, on these gifts as they are offered.

Bless us and brothers and sisters far and wide as we worship you on this Advent Sabbath day. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

We pray your blessing, God, on all gifts that are offered – gifts of time, of skill and talent, gifts of companionship and compassion. Bless these gifts of money that are being offered here, now. May each giver be filled with your joy and may this money be used in ways that honor you and reflect your love. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Let us come to a time of prayer confessing our weakness of faith:

O God,

In this busy season of the year when we anticipate celebration and gift-giving, many of us wonder how we can celebrate when we hear of tragedies like destructive tornadoes.

We also wonder how we can celebrate when celebration is commercialized and artificial, designed to increase somebody's profits.

Somewhere deep down, we know that true celebration rests upon your goodness and redeeming love.

We confess our faltering faith and lack of trust that you are at work.

We confess that we at times fall into the arrogance and sense of entitlement our culture encourages us to have. We expect to be successful, and we expect to be above disappointment, and loss.

In our fixation on life as we wish it to be, we miss the simple joys that are there already for us. We fail to notice your presence.

Help us to find joy and practice joy.

In silence we confess to you whatever weighs on our hearts.

(silence)

Amen.

We Continue with words of Assurance from Isaiah 12.

Yah is a shorter form of Yahweh, and happens to be used in this particular translation.

Leader: God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid.

People: Yah, the Lord, is my strength and shield; he has become my salvation

Leader: Sing to the Lord, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout the earth.

All: Shout and sing for joy, city of Zion, because the holy one of Israel is great among you.

GOD'S SONG – PASTOR CALEB

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion! Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

These sound like joyful words, don't they? We all like feel joy. And sometimes we think we *should* be joyful even if we are not.

One of life's biggest questions is how to find joy. And how to find a joy-filled faith.

Joy erupts when we feel connected. When we feel we belong. When we feel love for someone we're close to and when we feel loved.

We feel joy when we receive good news. Not so much when things continue to go well, but when a problem we were facing is resolved, and we anticipate happy days.

Some churches emphasize joy more than others. I've mentioned the neighborhood church I was a part of for a few years in Honduras. It was called Zion Mennonite Church.

There you were expected to be joyful in church, whether heart-felt or a little coerced. I clearly remember the time that young people were all asked on the spur of the moment to come to the front and dance in order to pep up the congregation.

You think we could try that here? Just pick a good praise chorus and anyone between 15 and 30 needs to come to the stage to create the mood by dancing. We could try it!

I was in the category of "young person" at that time, and would have been glad for a magic ring to turn invisible.

A guy named Wilson must have seen a look on my face, because he started rooting for me: "you can do it, Caleb!"

WHO WAS ZEPHANIAH?

The book of Zephaniah is definitely in the category of joy from a problem resolved. "Problem" probably isn't the right word. Let's call it terrible world-wide judgment.

Judah as well as a number of other nations have it coming to them. In a few short chapters, the prophet prophecies doom, before erupting into joy at the very end.

The name "Zephaniah" means Yahweh ("the Lord") protects or hides. Protection or hiding is just what you would have wanted when the day of the Lord came around. You didn't want to be around when God would "sweep away everything from the face of the earth" (Zep 1:2).

It's possible that Zephaniah gave something like the words of this scroll during a major festival in which pilgrims showed up in Jerusalem. The final celebration at the end is a worshipful celebration in front of the temple during the festival.

Like a worship service, you can read the Zephaniah's book as words of confession of sin, followed by words of assurance of grace (at least for the humble remnant).

Zephaniah was like Jesus in that he strongly criticized the religious elite in charge of the temple for corruption and insincere faith.

In verse three he says, *“The officials within [Jerusalem] are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons.”*

The coming judgment would be on the powerful, the corrupt, and the oppressors. But Jerusalem would be restored for a remnant or small group of “humble” people.

Zephaniah ministered during the beginning of the reign of King Josiah, probably before King Josiah’s extensive reforms. Josiah was the last “good” king because of his reforms, a couple decades before the rise of the Babylonian empire and the fall of Judah to Babylon.

Though Zephaniah doesn’t speak in specifics, his words seem to anticipate both the exile and the restoration. Zechariah appears to have been a well-connected man himself, but he foresees God lifting up the “nobodies.”

*“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”* (Zeph 3:19 NRSV).

Many of us today struggle with feelings of shame. Shame is a kind of cousin to guilt, except that where guilt makes you say “I made a mistake,” shame makes you say, “I am a mistake.”¹

Shame creeps in unnoticed and infects our relationships and our capacity to live out God’s best for our lives.

We think we get away from shame by striving, achieving, and winning, when the reality is that we can only counter shame when we experience God’s embrace and love.

Now, a fair question for another time is how shame looks differently in different cultures. We are a super-individualistic culture, and biblical culture was very communitarian.

People celebrated in community and they mourned in community. Shame was also collective. The “nobodies” of the nation, the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the people without access were shamed.

And this is what God reverses in verse 19, reading again:

*“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.”*

¹ See Brene Brown, “Listening to Shame” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1DORYV0>

IMAGES OF GOD/GOD'S RESPONSE

Zephaniah is very striking for how God gets involved in the celebration, in the festival Zephaniah describes. God's embrace and love show up.

God is right there at the festival singing. Not just giving people a reason to sing, but singing right alongside them.

I wonder whether God is a tenor, a bass, alto, or soprano. Or maybe all the above.

*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 (3:17 NRSV)*

Another translation says that God "will take great delight in you." *Delight*.

Most of us may not lie awake at night dreading God's violent wrath, but we also don't picture God "*delighting*" in us.

What does it look like for God to take *delight* in us? Or in despised people? It surely isn't because we are perfect. I hope God doesn't have to discharge a bunch of anger first.

The God who delights in us and rejoices over us with singing is a God who bore our sorrows and our violence as Christ hung on the cross, and transformed humanity's darkest out into resurrection.

It's the good news of our sin, our failures, our shame, and our hopelessness re-made in the hands of God into something beautiful. That's the full spectrum of emotion from despair to joy if you ask me.

EMOTION IN WORSHIP

We struggle in most of our churches to know what to do with emotions, how to express them, whether to express them, and how to have a faith that is heart-felt like Jerusalem rejoicing with all her heart. Some churches prescribe happiness, which inevitably turns into faked happiness. And other churches pretend like emotion doesn't belong in church.

This is why seeing the bigger context of Zephaniah is important. Yes, the book ends on a note of exuberant joy, but only after anticipating judgment and pain. Not only that, but neither the judgment or the restoration have happened yet. Zephaniah ministered before the threat of exile was upon the doorstep, and long before the return to the land.

In the Black church, as well as many Latino or Latin American churches, there is a whole range of emotion, and embodied experience, encompassing both joy and sorrow. Recently I heard an interview with a writer named Austin Channing Brown. As she described worship in Black churches, she said, "*So, if you go to a service, and you don't laugh and cry and dance and have a*

*really rich conversation and maybe have one conversation that also made you angry, you probably didn't go to church that day."*²

Maybe the answer to how joy can be authentic and not forced is to allow it to coexist with other feelings.

It may be natural to feel joy when something good happens. Sometimes we also need to let ourselves feel joy even while we are still waiting in a wilderness space. After all, Paul wrote Philippians, a joy-infused letter, while in prison.

JOY VERSUS OTHER EMOTIONS

I know myself to be a kind of melancholy person. A realist. I've sometimes have judged myself for that, as if that was a deficiency. I should be more "joyful," I'd think. Part of accepting myself for who I am has been accepting my personality and temperament with its gifts and limitations.

In moderation, melancholy can be a gift. It's a temperament that means seeing uncomfortable truths that most people avoid or remain oblivious to. When other people are struggling with a bit of shock, you say, "oh yeah, I totally saw that coming."

If I want to justify a being a little bit of a downer, the prophets are full of pretty negative-sounding messages. In fact, we don't understand the notes of hope, restoration, and celebration if we don't hear them in the context of the injustice and tragedy that the prophets truthfully named.

Life is a mix of the mundane, stress, grief, and joy. Young children occasion about every emotion in the book – both in themselves and mom and dad.

CLOSING – YOU HAVE PERMISSION

It's paradoxical, but one thing I keep hearing, and am only beginning to understand for myself is that we only open ourselves up to joy, when we feel all our emotions.

If you numb your pain, then you also numb any possibility of joy. The opposite of joy isn't sorrow. The opposite of joy is apathy. It's not caring (or pretending we don't care). We numb joy if we also numb emotions we'd rather not feel.

So let me give you all permission:

You have permission to forgive yourself for however it is you feel you are not enough.

Permission to feel what you feel – the full range of anger, sadness, anticipation, or joy.

You have permission to be hopeful even without definite evidence of the outcome you'd like.

You have permission to dance for joy – even if there's no clear reason.

² Austin Channing Brown, "Preaching the Bible in the Black Church," <https://peteenns.com/episode-190-austin-channing-brown-preaching-the-bible-in-the-black-church/>

You have permission to carve out the space you need for joy, if that means rest, finding the right people to celebrate with, or taking a break from the mundane to pursue your favorite things.

Joy is an expression of faith in the beauty that God will surely bring about and is creating even now. Don't wait for something to happen first to seize a moment for joy. Seize those moments when you can, as we imagine God's song.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you pictured God singing with joy, what would God sound like? What would it be like for God to take delight in you?
2. Is joy only possible in favorable circumstances? Where do we find joy when circumstances are not good?
3. How can we joyfully be a part of bringing joy to suffering people?