

Rejoice Always?

Menno Mennonite Church
December 12, 2021

Advent 3, Year C

Purpose: To place “the day of the Lord” into the context of God’s action and grace.

Message: We rejoice into the anticipation of what God is doing, expressing our hope, even when hope can be challenging.

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20 [sermon focus—I will read]; Philippians 4:4-7 [Please read]; Luke 3:7-18; Isaiah 12:2-6

Synopsis: Rejoicing, sometimes, is not easy. We know it and know that there is much in our worlds that would bring us to joy and praise. Yet in some cases we have to actively imagine our ways into a state of hope, the anticipation of promise. Zephaniah- -this short story of God and God’s people does not mince words—Israel, the beloved daughter was to struggle. Yet, in the end and at the root of it all there is the cause for joy, anticipation, and the articulation of Joy. Not as means of ignoring the challenges of the world, but as the active declaration of there being something beyond us, beyond now, inviting us always forward.

In rejoicing we take a step in revealing the Kingdom coming. We are welcomed into this as a sign of hope, trust, and the declaration of how things are and will be, come what may.

For, if it is true that the child was born of the virgin and is mine, then I have no angry God and I must know and feel that there is nothing but laughter and joy in the heart of the Father and no sadness in my heart. – Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Afternoon of Christmas Day”¹

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ 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;
YHWH will rejoice over you with gladness,
YHWH will renew you in his love;
YWH 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.

We know the ritual well. We set out the candles, part of our signaling of what time it is. Five candles; red, purple, white. We arrange them just so and light them in anticipation. We light them in the name of hope, peace, joy, love. It is a reminder of the coming of the light, the marking of tradition, the thing to do at this time of the year. Every monotheistic religion does the same at this time of the calendar. There is something about the short days that demand us to dig more deeply for light and hope, perhaps harkening back to when light on demand was far more of a miracle than it has been for the last couple hundred years. We light them, watch their flames as they glow and twinkle, each week offering more light to the world around. The flame dances in the breeze as we are invited to consider the promise of incarnation—of God with us—a thing of long ago, a thing of right here today, and something we wait on still today. We look to the light to declare that even in the darkest moments, light will, always, cast the shadows away; that God will cast the shadows aside. We look to them to be reminded that God cannot be kept out of our world, no matter what might happen in the mean time.

Not that we believe that. Not in every way. Not all the time. It can be hard to live with this promise fully realized within our spiritual selves. There are times where we wonder where God has gone, whether the shadows might just persist, whether we have somehow grown darker. Sometimes when we look at our world, we wonder what unassuming flames can really tell, wishing more for stadium lights than the promise of a candle. We can begin to consider the rumor that is always flying just beneath the surface of things: that God might not be with us in the way that we thought. That there are times and places where God simply is not. That God can look upon beloved children and somehow be chased out. I hope that this is not your constant companion, these doubts and ponderings, but we each know their visitation all the same, no matter who we are.

We come here because this is our experience of the world. We often confuse that which we anticipate and celebrate in this time as a matter of historical record rather than the present and permanent reality of universal change. We can think that keeping the Christ in Christmas is more about remembering than it is being reminded of the present reality; that what is said in the passing interactions in the store is what it is all about. We can get confused and forget the Christmas is not, Spiritually, about getting what we want. It is about getting what we most deeply and profoundly need—A God that remain no matter what. We can forget that Christ was born without the endorsement of the powers that be. We forget that we worship a messiah born

into empire. As part of an oppressed minority. In a barn. Following a genocide. To an unwed mother and faithful, but fearful father on the road. None of this could keep God out.

We are tempted by the heresy that would suggest that things happen as they do because we have neglected our relationship with God. When bad things happen, be they shootings or tornados, there is always someone ready with an explanation to diagnose where we went wrong, or how we might repair the relationship with God. As much as our place our culture is in need of a soul level transplant, it is not this reality that has somehow soured God from us. God remains with us. God does not need our prayers to be present, but welcomes them all the same. God does not require our government to do one thing or another to be present to us. Remember it was the politics of power that put Jesus on trial for offending God, found him guilty, put him in the ground, never to be heard of again. Only to have that judgement emphatically and fully overturned 3 days later. Because God cannot be kept out.

This is what the incarnation means: that God comes and is with us, no matter what. That God cannot be offended, excluded, or just generally put off with how our world can be, how we can be. God Cannot be kept out, no matter what. There are times, yes, when the consequences of our decisions and are world must run their course, but that does not mean we have been abandoned. God does not require our prayers to be present to us, our faithfulness to love us, our performance to embrace us. God is with us, with out world, and we could not change that even if we tried. The late Spiritual writer Rachel Held Evans wrote on this line: *“God can be found everywhere if we are willing to look: in a feeding trough, on a throne, among the poor, with the sick, on a donkey, in a fishing boat, with a junkie, with the prostitute, the hypocrite, with the forgotten, in places of power, places of oppression, in poverty, in wealth, where God’s name is known and where it is not, with our friends, with our enemies, in our convictions and our failure, in our brokenness, in our doubts, in life, in death, at the table, on the cross and in every classroom from Sandy Hook to Shanghai.”* (God Kept out Blog, December 2012). God cannot be kept out because God in Christ has come, and is with us no matter what, no matter how, forever more. And that, friends, is good news.

As good of news as this is, this truth is not always our home. That is why we light the candles. That is why we search for the Christ. Our doubt, fear, grief can stand in the way of our seeing. And that is OK; Yet no matter what, this remains, always, a cause for Rejoicing.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem! (Zephaniah 3:14).

If you want to read a whole book of the Bible, and don't have a huge amount of time on your hands, try the 3 chapters of Zephaniah on for size. Just don't expect to find such lyricism like this throughout. Written to the people of the great Babylonian Exile, the prophet makes it absolutely clear that the situation which Zion finds itself is dire, despite time and again using the language of daughter and child to pain the picture. Like so many before Zephaniah lays out the case and the reasons for what was to be, and the calamity that was to be visited. But even here, even with this, this is not where the story ends. This is not all there is to say. Even in the brink of disaster, the God of covenant cannot be kept out, and will not remain absent forever. In the day of the Lord—a day long sought after as the realization of the coming of YHWH in messianic form long before the feared day of judgement—the day of the Lord will come, and in that day, in the promise of that day, joy is always possible. The words we heard of Paul echoes the theme: Rejoice always and again I say rejoice. The reality of God with us is always a cause and an inspiration to come and rejoice. For God is with us, in the good and the challenge, meeting us time and again when we know where to look.

Rejoicing, ultimately, is not something that is driven as a sense of mode or emotion. It is a function of exalting in the full promise of what is. This is not about smiling that the whole world might smile with you; it is about residing in and living through the deep promises of God's faithful covenant and present help. Rejoicing is something that calls us to look, perhaps, beyond the present, beyond how we feel, and to look for the light at the end of the tunnel. Rejoicing is a matter of the discipline of looking for that which will be, even when that timing seems a long way off. No matter how dark the season, or bleak the outlook, or weary the soul, we are called into the work of rejoicing for we know that what is now is not all that there is. It is the work of rejoicing to time and again look for the God with us where and how we find it. Because God *is* with us, we are always given something on which we can depend, a presence in which we can rejoice. We dare not confuse our present circumstances for the state of God in the world, nor the fate of the universe. We know that this is not ours to hold, and that we can trust the one who does.

Rejoicing is a function of the body—of the whole of the nation of Zion and the hope of Israel. None of us are going to be ready to rejoice all the time; but that is why we need the body around us to help us declare that of God that is present in the world that they notice when we

simply cannot see it for ourselves. That is why we need to encourage each other, to cheer each other on. This is true in the congregation; this is true in the world-wide-body of Jesus Christ. We need each other to be about the task of rejoicing when we ourselves are simply not up to the task. We cannot always do this by ourselves for ourselves. Sometimes, this deep joy is hard to find in the midst of our present moods. Sometimes, it can seemingly ring hollow as we try to find something nice to say.

Celebrating/ rejoicing in/ worshipping God is never a denial of the reality we live in. Life is hard. But it is an aspect of our worship – our rejoicing – our faith that is always exists beyond the sum total of our moods and attitudes of right here and right now, for until the day of the Lord, the final word has not been spoken.

The circumstances of the nativity were far from positive. There was real fear, real challenge, and no small dose of misgiving involved here. She was pregnant and in trouble. Joseph knew this; Mary knew it, and it took all that she had to follow faithfully and find a way forward. Yet even here she finds her way to rejoice, singing the song of hope and peace.

God cannot be kept out. That is what we declare in these days. We do so with modest flame, generous deed, and hopeful promise. As we do so, we can open our eyes to see the glimpses of God's light, even where we least expect.

For God cannot be kept out of our lives, our world, our circumstances, or, when it comes, our grief. Thanks be to God. Amen.