

“The Church in Advent: Rejoicing”—Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
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.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
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
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
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.
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.

The date was October 12, the Friday after Hurricane Michael. I woke up early from a fitful night of sleep—it was too warm in the house to sleep, and without screens on the windows we couldn’t let in the cool air. So when I woke up, I grabbed one of our little electric lanterns, a pack of unheated and unheatable Pop-tarts, a Coke Zero from the cooler, my Bible, and my devotional materials, and I went out on the patio. I ate my breakfast, read my Scriptures and my devotional

readings, prayed, and then just sat back and watched the sun rise in the cool of the morning. I watched as the sky turned a deep blue, as it does just before sunrise, and I thought about hope—the hope that comes with the birth of a new day, the hope that comes with being born anew in Jesus, the hope that comes with believing that Jesus has come and is coming again, the hope that is celebrated by the use of blue as one of the liturgical colors of Advent. I thought about thanksgiving—not the holiday, but the act of giving thanks to God that I was alive, that my family was alive, and that no one I knew had been killed or injured. And I thought about divine providence—I didn't know how long we would be without power, how long we might be eating sandwiches, how long we would be without the conveniences we take so much for granted; but I knew that God would somehow provide all that we needed, even if it wasn't all that we wanted.

Suddenly, tears were streaming down my face, and, quite honestly, it startled me. I didn't understand why. My first thought was that this was an emotional release from the tension of the past few days. But then it all became crystal clear—I knew that God through his Holy Spirit was speaking to my spirit and teaching me that, even in the midst of this chaos, he was holding me and my family and everyone I knew and even everyone I didn't know in the palms of his hands. The unexpected, unbidden tears rolling down my face were tears of unutterable, unspeakable joy.

It's this joy that I've needed, and that I think we all need, as we try to navigate through these days of uncertainty, these days when this crazy, mixed up, messed up world seems even crazier, more mixed up, and more messed up than ever. As individuals, we're trying to get back to some sense of normalcy as we continue to recover from Hurricane Michael. As a congregation, we're trying to figure some things out as we continue with our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of our community and the world. As a denomination, we're trying to find a way forward through some issues that threaten to make formal our already functional divisions. And as citizens of our nation and the world, who knows where we're going? In the midst of all this, we aren't always happy—but then, happiness and joy are not always the same. Happiness is fleeting; it's temporary; it comes and goes. But joy is more permanent; joy runs much deeper; joy is inexhaustible—because joy is rooted in God's love, power, and presence; joy is rooted in our faith that God hasn't given up on us or on this world.

Now, the words we've heard this morning from the prophet Zephaniah are a call to rejoicing, a call to sing and shout and celebrate the blessing of God upon his people, for the Lord God of Israel would come and dwell in the midst of his Chosen People.

But we need to know that not all of Zephaniah's words were words of comfort and cheer. What we've heard this morning is preceded by words of

judgment. God would send a foreign conqueror to ravage the nation and carry his people off to exile. But then Zephaniah changes his tone and speaks of joy—he speaks of good news. And the prophet’s good news was that, in his own good time, God would lift the punishment from his people; the exiles would be brought home; and God himself would dwell in their midst as their king to rule over them in justice and to lead them in righteousness. That day, Zephaniah said, would be a day of singing and shouting and dancing, a day of rejoicing and exuberance. Those days, Zephaniah said, would be days of rejoicing.

For those of us who are God’s people today, for the Church in Advent, these days are also days of joy. In fact, this third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as *Gaudete*, or “Joy” Sunday. We’ve had a couple of Sundays of repentance, of getting ready to receive not only the Babe of Bethlehem but also the Christ who comes in final victory. But just as Zephaniah’s mood shifts from gloom and doom to hope and rejoicing, so we too make a shift in our Advent celebrations. Zephaniah’s call to “Sing aloud, . . . shout . . . rejoice and exult with your heart . . .!” seems more in keeping with our desires for Yuletide celebration. For the Church in Advent, these are truly days of rejoicing.

But our joy in this season is not something we can create. It doesn’t come from getting all worked up over the exuberance of the season. It doesn’t come from a positive psychological assessment of ourselves. It doesn’t come from self-esteem, positive thinking, and “Be Happy Attitudes.” Joy, you see, is reflexive; it’s reactive; it’s responsive. Joy is a gift from God. In fact, joy is the gift of God himself, for the Lord our God is in our midst. Joy is the response of our lives to our belief that God has come into our midst as Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, the Son of God who emptied himself of the privileges of divinity in order to become a full flesh-and-blood human, the Christ who humbled himself in obedience to the will of the Father, giving himself voluntarily for our sakes to atone for our sins and reconcile us to God and one another. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, put it this way: “The Son of God became man to enable us to become children of God.”

And so we respond in joy. The stories of Jesus fill us with joy—for the stories of his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection tell us that God is in our midst and has acted to save us. God has come into a world where darkness and death hold sway, a world of sin and shame, to bring light and life and salvation. There’s tremendous truth in the words of the anonymous writer who said, “Regret not that Christmas comes but once a year; rejoice that in a world like ours Christmas comes at all!”

But our Advent rejoicing runs deeper still, for Emmanuel—God with us—comes not just into the world, but into each of our lives as well. God has intruded into our lives, making us aware of our sin, and revealing to us the judgment and

penalty of our sin, which is eternal separation from him. But if God in Jesus brings a word of judgment, he also brings a word of hope, a word of salvation that leads to joy—for if we will turn our lives over to God and accept what he has done for us in Jesus, then the sentence is lifted, the slate wiped clean, the sin forgiven, the judgment set aside, and we become, not aliens estranged from God, but sons and daughters of God, a part of his family. We are set free—free from sin and its penalty; and in that freedom we can truly worship and give thanks; in that freedom we can, as Zephaniah calls us, “Sing aloud . . . shout . . . rejoice and exult with all your heart . . .!” We can sing and dance and celebrate before the Lord, because he is truly Emmanuel—God with each of us.

For the Church in Advent, these are truly days of rejoicing—a joy that comes in response to being made a redeemed, reconciled, forgiven people, a people who have been given a new birth, another life, a second chance. As we get ready to welcome once again the Child of the Manger into our hearts, into our lives, and into his Church, and as we await his coming again, let us do so with rejoicing—with the praise of our hearts and the praise of our lips. As the Church in Advent, let us rejoice—the Lord our God is in our midst! Thanks be to God!