

Advent 3 December 12, 2021

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

What should we do?

This question comes from the crowd gathered around John, the baptizer, who have heard his direct confrontation with them about their salvation. Convicted by his statements they ask, what should we do? They are convinced that they should repent, change their minds on how they are to live. What should we do?

We could go into the specifics of John's answer to each of the professions (got extra food and clothes, share. Live out your professions with honor- don't abuse them), but I would instead call your attention to the other texts today and propose the possibility that rejoicing might be an option.

Zephaniah says "O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!" Why? "Because the Lord your God is in your midst." God is among you! A reason to rejoice, certainly.

Isaiah, too, encourages Israel to "shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Paul in his letter to the Philippians, written while he was in jail, exhorts them to "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!" Why? "Because the Lord is near."

If rejoicing is an option for what we must do when we repent, change our minds, then that begs the question, what do you think of when joy or rejoicing comes to mind?

For most of us, it probably would be the internal feeling that comes with this kind of external from Buddy the Elf. Or when you do your happy dance! Or celebrate a joyous moment. We tend to associate joy and rejoicing with that momentary or at least time bounded feeling of excitement at something.

But what does Paul mean when he says rejoice? What does joy mean to him in this context?

Paul's letter to the Philippians is written from jail, one of the most horrible experiences you could have imagined in the ancient world. Yet, he speaks of his experience of joy or rejoicing throughout the four chapters of this short letter.

Joy for Paul is not that fleeting feeling that depends on circumstances. The Buddy Elf or happy dance feeling. Rather, it is a theological act. It is an ongoing and habitual attitude that informs his behavior, and it is not dependent upon circumstances, but rather upon his seeing everything through the lens of God's actions to win back the whole universe, even when all the present evidence seems to indicate some other power has won.

What this means is that our joy rests not in our circumstances or us, but in God and God's action and activity.

This is why Zephaniah, and Isaiah, and Paul all connect our joy to the presence of God. For the Lord is with us, the Lord is near! Our joy comes from what God has done and is continuing to do in the world.

Now, I don't know about you, but I love those Buddy Elf/Happy dance moments. I love watching my wife or our daughter Amanda react in that way to a gift or surprise. There is nothing wrong with that kind of happiness. But it is a fleeting feeling dependent on circumstance. Circumstances that we cannot often control.

What I need, what we all need, is the joy that Paul has.

It is one that comes because he sees the world through the lens of God's action.

He sees that God has already exalted Jesus in his resurrection from the tomb. God has won the battle against what he calls the principalities and powers and death. Paul knows that in the end the whole world will acknowledge Jesus as Lord. He knows that regardless of what pain he suffers now, what grief, that whatever fear he may have for his safety or for the future, he knows that his real King is near. That his citizenship is not of this world but lies in God's kingdom. That he lives not under the reign of Caesar, but the reign of God.

This is the foundation of Paul's joy- a contentment rooted not in fleeting emotion or circumstance, but solid promise of God.

Dr. Carla Works, from the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC in her commentary on this passage from Philippians expresses it far better than I can.

"Have no anxiety. Be worried about nothing, says the apostle from his prison cell. The naysayers will come (3:2). The believers' faith will be tested. They may suffer as Paul has suffered. But Paul urges them to think like Jesus who stood in solidarity with the oppressed by taking on the form of a slave (2:7). Yes, Jesus died on a cross. Yes, the powers killed him. But a far greater power exalted him and

bestowed upon him the name which is above every name. This is the God whom they serve. This is the reason that they can rejoice.

This God did not abandon Jesus and will not abandon you. “The Lord is near.” The Lord is so near that you can speak to God and take your concerns to this All-Powerful King.

The peace of God will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. This peace is not simply calmness or the absence of anxiety. This peace is better than understanding. In other words, peace has power over, excels, and surpasses reasoning. It is superior to human understanding because this peace comes from God. It stems from the work of God’s Spirit to bring about God’s new creation. Peace, after all, is God’s shalom—wholeness, restoration, and goodness. The presence of this peace can give joy even in the most difficult of times.

This is why, Dr. Works writes, the apostle can urge the community to be peaceable to all: “Let all people know your gentleness” (verse 5). How believers behave in the hard times reveals a lot about their vision of good news. If they have to bring about their own justice, the Philippians, we, are doomed. The future does not look bright for Paul. He and the Philippians and us are in a system and a situation that seems hopeless. Paul places the believers’ hope back in God whose power is greater than that of Rome or any powers that might try to thwart this good news.

Dr. Works continues, in this season of Advent, in a time of waiting and longing, we read the exhortation to rejoice. Rejoicing does not negate or turn a blind eye to despair. Rejoicing does not somehow make the suffering go away or minimize the injustice. Rather, rejoicing acknowledges that we are serving the one and only

God who can rectify the wrongs, who can—and has—stood in solidarity with the oppressed. Rejoicing in the face of gross injustice is a courageous act, a theological hope lived out in the present that stems from a vision of God's shalom—a shalom so glorious that it is transforming and claiming life even in the present.

Rome does not get the last word. The suffering of the prison cell does not define or end this good news. This gospel will carry on because the work never rested on Paul or even on the church, but on God. Thanks be to God!

And so, my friends, what are we to do? Change our thinking, look upon the work with a theological vision and see things within God's time, and rejoice. Because, like Lucille Sue baptized today, we have been claimed by that same God whose work has already won the day. Rejoice, friends in Christ. Again I will say, Rejoice. For the Lord is near. Near both in time and in space. Near to us God's beloved children.

And may the peace of God, that surpasses all our human reasoning and understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.