

This Sunday's texts:

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 7:18-28

**Advent Joy**  
**Pastor Jim Cords**  
**December 12, 2021**

We begin with the lighting of the Advent candle. Today, we light the three candles. The pink candle is the candle of joy. The light of joy tickles our hearts in Advent. This candle is the party candle of Advent. In joy's light, we learn again to delight in simple things: a smile on the face of a stranger, the sparkle in the eye of a friend, the birth of a baby. The candle of joy proclaims "Joy to the world!" Let us pray. Holy God, we thank you for Advent, for this season of anticipation. We thank you for your presence to us, for your joy that is to the world. We thank you for the opportunity to worship together and we pray that we would worship you in spirit and in truth. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

The holy gospel for this Advent Joy Sunday comes to us from Luke, the seventh chapter:

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?"

When the men came to Jesus they said, "John the Baptist sent us to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' " At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women there is no

one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this Joy Sunday and we pray that you would root joy and our confidence in you deep in our souls that it might overcome all circumstances. In Jesus’ name. Amen

There was a long time in my life when I really, really enjoyed Advent Joy Sunday, this third Sunday in Advent, the rose-colored candle Sunday, in part because I had fallen into a misunderstanding that the repentance called for in the early Sundays in Advent was a negative thing. I’ve since learned that the call to repentance is an invitation, rooted in love and in the goodness of God. And Joy Sunday is just an opportunity to celebrate that.

But then I have to admit I was a little surprised because I’ve also experienced this Philippians text on both sides. Sometimes I read that “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” How many of you memorized that? Yeah, it’s a great verse. But have you ever heard it read by someone else to you when you’re depressed, when you got all sorts of things going on that you’re really not happy about? Then it feels like this burdensome command. It’s like wait a minute, I’m supposed to rejoice and I just don’t feel like rejoicing. I just don’t have it in me. Yet if you really understand Paul, you know that he wrote that from prison. He wrote that knowing the kinds of circumstances that come in our lives that bring us huge disappointment and that often cause us to wear blinders that we just can’t see good ahead. We’re called by God to rejoice not because of circumstances, because of who he is, because of his faithfulness in his promise.

So I was delighted then also to continue reading the other lessons, but then I realized this gospel lesson is kind of troublesome too. You know John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the cousin of Jesus who when he was in utero leaped for joy at Mary’s presence with his mom<sup>1</sup>. He’s the John the Baptist that Jesus went out to be baptized, where literally he saw God come down on Jesus and say “This is my son.”<sup>2</sup> Yet in this text, John says to his disciples go and ask Jesus is he the one or should we look for another. The very person whom God assigned, called, and sent into the world to prepare the way for the Messiah, the very one who is called to be

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:41

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:21-22

the announcer of the coming of Jesus is now sending his disciples in the background to come to Jesus and go ask are you really the right one because I'm kind of in trouble if you're not. I've kind of been telling people.

It's one of the things I love about the scripture. It's honest. The scripture reflects the reality of our lives. It's not just a Pollyanna thing. The scripture and the stories of scripture allow us to recognize that the ups and downs of life can sometimes lead us to a place of doubt. John the Baptist, this forerunner of the Messiah, was in prison and it was taking longer than he thought. He wasn't seeing the kinds of things he was expecting to see. He's going like did I misunderstand? Did I get it wrong? And Jesus doesn't come back with an argument. He just continues doing what he's doing and he says to John's disciples tell him what you see. It's in a way a word from Jesus to remind John of what the Messiah was really prophesied to do and to be. When he looked at what Jesus was doing, John's going yes, he is, in fact, doing those things that the Messiah was called to do.

And then in our lesson this morning, we have Zephaniah, this minor prophet in the Old Testament. How many of you memorized Zephaniah? That's what I thought. Zephaniah, in our lesson this morning, it's jubilant. It's another call to rejoicing. It's talking about the promises of God, but you might have read Zephaniah, maybe you haven't, but let me just tell you what it says in my Study Bible about Zephaniah. The purpose of Zephaniah: Zephaniah wrote to Israel, as well as to the whole world. He did not consider anyone safe from God's judgment unless he was living a righteous life. Zephaniah did not write about gloom and doom because he was obsessed with it. He wrote and spoke about it because it was the sure telltale sign that God took his relationship with humanity seriously. The day of the Lord is coming and the world is in big, big trouble. The first two chapters of Zephaniah paint a horrible picture, I mean, a horrible picture of the terrible day of the Lord. It's really intended to say even to the people of Israel if you think God coming is a good thing, I want to remind you that he's going to come in righteousness and holiness and if that's not where your life is, you're going to burn. It's a bad, tough word. Don't put your hope in the wrong thing.

Let me just unpack that a little bit because the people of Israel, like many of us, were just looking around, trying to figure out how to get along in the world. Unfortunately, at this

time, they had had a number of unrighteous kings and so throughout the land of Israel, there were a number of different places where you could worship one god or another. The people were simply asking the question practically speaking how do I get by? It's interesting. I've had a few non-religious people that I bump into in the hospital ask me, when they see the cross or if I'm wearing my collar, that can you pray for me? Of course, I can pray for you. Then they say something like I just want to make sure all my bases are covered. I've had some people brag to me - you know there are people praying for my spouse all over the world. We've got Muslims. We've got Buddhists. We've got people all over the world praying. We're good to go.

Well, that wasn't the attitude of the prophets. That wasn't the attitude of the word of the Lord that came through the prophets. The word of the Lord that came to the prophets was you need to be faithful to Yahweh, faithful to the God of Israel, faithful to the God who has brought you to this place, who has called you to be his own - not just going along to get along, not following the flow of the other religions to cover your bases. As a matter of fact, God was pretty irritated with those previous kings and with the people of Israel. Zephaniah articulates that horrible, horrible day. They chill the soul because they remind the people of God's wrath.

You might be sitting there thinking now Pastor Jim, you're kind of being a downer right now. This is supposed to be Joy Sunday. I mean good let's get this right. Well, one of the interesting things also about the prophet Zephaniah is that it ends with the joyous words that were read by Chris this morning. It ends with this positive rejoicing faithfulness of God. We can count on God or maybe I should say, the remnant, the faithful remnant could count on God. That the day of the Lord for those who were on God's side was a good day, but for the enemies of God, those who turned away from God, it was not such a good day. Now the other interesting thing about Zephaniah is, listen to these words: "On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing'"<sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters in Christ, we want that to be God's word to us. Emmanuel, God with us, to elevate us beyond whatever circumstances are going on, so that we can sing with joy, the goodness of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Zephaniah 3:16-17

So I was wondering what brought Zephaniah from those really harsh words in the first couple of chapters to this very clear word of hope for God's people. One of the things I discovered was that a part of Zephaniah's being a prophet happened during the reign of Josiah. Josiah was made king of Israel when he was 8 years old. I have a feeling that the people of Israel on the coronation day of an eight-year-old boy were not expecting much because Josiah's grandparent was not a good king. I want to tell you something else about the problem of what was going on in Israel on that day. Earlier in Deuteronomy, when Moses is preparing the people to enter the Promised Land, Moses tells them this in Deuteronomy 17: "when [the king] takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him and he is to read it all the days of his life [meaning every day of his life he's to read from that law] so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees."<sup>4</sup> Well, these harsh words from Zachariah at the early part of his reign, we're at a time when the kings have completely ignored God. So much so that when Josiah made money available for the rebuilding and the repair of the temple, what they did was they found the lost scrolls. You know the ones the king is supposed to be reading every day? They lost them! They didn't know where they were. You know, when you read something every day, you usually know where you put it down. But when so much time goes by, I don't even know what happened to those. I didn't even know they existed. So all of a sudden, Josiah's servants bring back to him the scroll, the law and they read it to Josiah. He realizes right away that the way he is leading the people of Israel is not in keeping with the ways of God. And what does he do? This is several years after he started, eighteen years into his reign. He calls all the people together and he has the word of God read to the people, so that they can begin to see how it is that God would have them be a nation, be the people of God, be engaged in the world.

It's quite possible that a part of the hope that Zephaniah saw as a prophet was that there was a movement with the king and with the people to begin to take seriously the words from God, to begin to seek to live in harmony, to repent and experience the mercy and goodness of God to bless his people, to renew his people. That's exactly what we see in the

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 17:18-19

words of hope there near the end of Zephaniah. Josiah is proclaiming God's word for all the people to hear, not just for him as the king. Just to make clear, I don't miscommunicate. I want you to know that I don't think St. Timothy's is a fallen-under-judgment group of people that have ignored God's word. I just want to know I'm not saying that.

What I am saying is that we, like the people of Israel under Josiah, are going to embark in 2022 on a new engagement into God's word. We're going to seek as God's people to daily hear God's voice in and for our lives that we might more clearly align our hope, our viewpoint, and our joy to the things that we hear from God through his holy word. So in January, we're going to be launching this Bible reading program that will take us through this opportunity to daily hear the voice of God. Many, all I hope, of our grow groups are going to begin to discuss how their hearing from God through his words and how they think God is directing them in their lives to begin to live in harmony with that word and occasionally be corrected to repent and realign when we find ourselves drifting away. Jonna and I, through the entire year of 2022, are going to preach right along with those same readings, as we read through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice. That Bible reading plan will root us, too, as a community of God's people in his word of hope, so that we daily are renewed in that word of God that can sustain our joy and our hope in the midst of whatever circumstances may come. We, as the people of God in this place, want to walk together with Jesus, relying on the scripture to experience the joy of knowing God's voice and God's will for our lives. It is not an onerous thing. It is a gift to experience the presence of the living God in our lives, to give us a correct understanding not only of who he is, but who we are and how we can love and bear witness to one another living in the goodness and joy of God. I hope you will walk with us through that as we begin this New Year and as we journey now into the joy of music next weeks and into the wonder of the incarnation and the celebration of Christmas in the days ahead. Joy be with you! Amen.