

Beyond Fear? Joy
Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2012
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Texts: Zephaniah 3.14-20;
 Isaiah 12.2-6;
 Philippians 4.4-7;
 Luke 3.7-18

“Rejoice and exult with all your heart!”¹ “With joy you will draw from the wells of salvation.”² “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice!”³ As I heard each of these passages of scripture this morning, from the prophecy of Zephaniah to the song from Isaiah to the Epistle from Philippians, I could finally feel us turning the corner toward the joy and light of Christmas. The candle on this third Sunday of Advent is often called the candle of joy. The light is gathering – this third candle tips us toward the coming light of Christmas and the season of light that follows.

Joy is hard to describe. It is kind of like happiness but not exactly. In fact, I think happiness and joy come from rather different places. One is attached to circumstance and things that are tangible. Happiness is conditional. It comes and it goes with our moods and prosperity. It lives on the surface things and can be swept away with the smallest of disappointments.

¹ Zephaniah 3.14b

² Isaiah 12.3

³ Philippians 4.1

Joy is something altogether different. Its source is spiritual more than physical and it is located beneath the surface unshaken by the winds of change or the whimsy of moods. Happiness is fleeting. You feel happy when you get a promotion or have everything in your day work out the way you want. But, all it takes is to lose that job or have one wrench thrown in your plans and happiness goes out the window. Joy on the other hand is more enduring and timeless. You can access it when life isn't all you hoped and dreamed it would be.

I ran across a quote by Richard Rohr that speaks to the spiritual discipline involved in cultivating joy. He writes: "I have committed myself to Joy. I have come to realize that those who make space for Joy, those who prefer nothing to Joy, those who desire the utter reality, will most assuredly have it." He goes on to say, "We must not be afraid to announce it to refugees, slum dwellers, saddened prisoners, angry prophets. Now and then we must even announce it to ourselves. In this prison of now, in this cynical and sophisticated age, someone must believe in Joy."⁴

You can feel the building cadence, the case being made for joy, in our texts for this day. Then Gordon stood up and read from the gospel and we hear John the Baptist - the killjoy of the day - bring the crescendo of joy to a screeching halt. It's tempting to simply set aside his warnings of judgment and his call to repentance as the ranting of an angry prophet and just turn back toward the more inspiring and comforting promises of Zephaniah and Isaiah and Philippians. "Do not fear, do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst"⁵ "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid."⁶ "The

⁴ Richard Rohr quoted in *Behold: Arts for the Church Year. Advent 2012-Epiphany 2013 (Year C)*, Logos Productions, 2012, pg. 12.

⁵ Zephaniah 3.16b-17a

⁶ Isaiah 12.2a

Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.”⁷ When you hear these promises one after the other you get the impression that the source of our joy comes directly from the intervening hand of God stepping in to bring salvation, to remove disaster, to deal with oppressors, and remove shame, to renew us in love.

The promise of these texts, like the song of Zechariah last week and the song of Mary next week, all envision a day when God will come and turn all things on their head. Why? Because we have made such an awful mess of this good and beautiful life God has entrusted to us. I remember saying two weeks ago that if you didn’t already wake up with a sense of how dangerous and fragile life can be a quick perusal of the headlines will immediately bring you to that reality. I had no idea how brutally true that assertion would be. I still cannot find words to express the horror of watching the news unfold on Friday⁸. And it brings into sharp focus the cost we all bear for living in a world that has become such an awful mess.

All of these prophecies, these songs of vindication, they all envision God as the One who will untangle the web of our self-destruction. And that is correct: that is what God is forever doing with us. The question is how this untangling will occur and how we will bear the pain of such suffering. And this is where I begin to hear some groundwork being laid for reclaiming joy out of the lips of John the Baptist. Perhaps John isn’t the killjoy he at first appears to be.

For ones who live under oppressive regimes, a word of repentance that can infiltrate the corrupt hearts of the soldiers terrorizing your lives can mean the difference between constant fear and the ability to sleep at

⁷ Philippians 4.5b-6a

⁸ On Friday, December 14, 2012 a man killed his mother and then went to the school where she taught and shot and killed twenty children and several more adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

night. For ones who live at the mercy of crooked tax collectors, a word of repentance that leads to financial reform can mean the difference between unending struggle and survival. For the ones who have nothing living in the shadows of those with everything, a word of repentance that can pry some human kindness and generosity out of those who have been indifferent to your suffering is cause for great rejoicing. According to John, the state of our world is directly connected to how we together use our power, position and wealth.

There is something pastoral in this word from John. If we don't change, if we don't take a hard look at our own responsibility as individuals and as a society for why this world is as broken as it is then we will keep hearing news that takes our breath away and breaks our hearts. If we want a safer world for our children then we have to do the hard work of looking at the root causes of such violence and find the will to do something about it. If we want community to sustain us in times of crises we have to invest in those relationships and in that community. If we want to be renewed in God's love we have to open our hearts to receive that love.

The work of repentance is what makes possible the vision of Zephaniah. God does the work of untangling the web of our self-destruction by joining with us in this life, where we are, walking beside us, weeping along with us, gently prodding us (or in the case of the John the Baptist screaming at us) to see the ways of peace and to do what it takes to walk in those ways. And to keep proclaiming the *joy* that is ours because we share this life and this work together.

I saw a post last night from a friend sharing a poem by Denise Levertov entitled "On the Mystery of the Incarnation. I simply must share it with you.

It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.

This is good news: that the Word was made flesh, and continues to be made flesh. It means that we are not alone. There is light even in the most sinister, dark nights of the soul.

And so we pray for the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding...

We pray for the coming of God with us...

We pray and we work and we listen for the cadence of joy.

Amen.