

Rejoice and Sing!
Zephaniah 3:12-17 (12/11/16)

As we begin this morning, I invite you to look with me at an Old Testament book that seldom gets much attention. It's the writings of the Minor Prophet Zephaniah. His prophecy begins as a stern pronouncement of doom upon the people of Jerusalem who have become arrogant, dishonest, and disobedient.

In the third chapter of Zephaniah, however, in verses 12-17, we find a beautiful passage of Scripture that describes what the prophet has been told God plans to do for those who are God's faithful remnant. He will give to them every reason to "rejoice and sing!" Listen, please, as I read **Zephaniah 3:12-17**:

**¹² ...I will leave within you
the meek and humble.
The remnant of Israel
will trust in the name of the LORD.
¹³ They will do no wrong;
they will tell no lies.
A deceitful tongue
will not be found in their mouths.
They will eat and lie down
and no one will make them afraid."**

**¹⁴ Sing, O Daughter of Zion;
shout aloud, O Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
O Daughter of Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.
¹⁶ On that day they will say to Jerusalem,
"Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.
¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing."**

On this third Sunday of Advent, we focus on the JOY the birth of Jesus brings to us. We lit the third candle—the JOY candle--on our Advent wreath. We sang carols of joy. But **centuries before Jesus came to this earth, Zephaniah promised that one day**

God would intervene in this world on behalf of His people, and the result would be singing--joyful singing!

Over and over again in Scripture, we hear this connection between the saving work of God...and the joyful sounds of His people. Here are a few examples found in the Psalms:

"...let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy." Psalm 5:11

"Sing to God a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy." Psalm 33:3

"Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation." Psalm 95:1

It's a theme that runs all through the Bible. God does a new and wonderful thing, and His people respond with singing—or, at the very least, they respond with a joyful noise!

Next Sunday, our Christmas Choir, accompanied by orchestral instruments, will sing! Like the angelic host singing to shepherds, they will bring us "...good news of great joy, for a Savior is born." "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill."

The birth of a child is normally a joyful occasion--whoever the child happens to be. Remember the old Gaither song: "How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride and JOY he gives..." These little gifts touch our hearts with joy.

Today's Advent candle is pink—do you know why? It's the Nativity candle: a child is born—be joyful! Every parent and grandparent can resonate with this. That baby finally arrives, and our hearts are filled with JOY. What an incredible gift!

This morning, I want us to understand that **JOY is always a gift--and can only truly be experienced when received as a gift.** Some of us, no doubt, are still searching for the perfect gift to give someone special this Christmas.

I heard about a family who had completely run out of ideas as to what to give Dad for Christmas. He already seemed to have everything he needed. So, finally, the kids just asked him, "Dad, what do you want for Christmas this year?"

“Oh,” he said, “why don’t you just give me a present that the whole family can get something out of.” What a surprise, though, when he unwrapped his gifts on Christmas morning and discovered that each child had given dear old Dad the very same gift--**a wallet!** But after all, it was exactly what he had asked for--a gift that “they all could get something out of.”

Many Dads, Moms, Grandparents, and others will dig deep into their wallets during this Christmas season. Unfortunately, some of them will believe that by doing so, they can purchase JOY.

But God’s word says that JOY can never be purchased. It comes to us only as a gift. You may recall that this is what the Grinch discovered in Dr. Seuss’ Christmas classic. Remember how, after he stole all the Christmas presents in Whoville, **the old Grinch drove his sleigh to the top of Mt. Crumpit...to dump it.**

Then, the Grinch paused and put his hand to his ear, just knowing that when the Whos down in Whoville discovered that their presents were missing, they’d all cry “boo-hoo.” But that’s not what the Grinch heard, is it?

The sounds he heard coming out of Whoville that Christmas morn were Merry--Very! For **“Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all!”**

If you remember the story, you’ll recall that it took the Grinch three hours to figure it out. That’s when he reached this conclusion: “Maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas means...a little bit more!”

Even sour old Grinches can be surprised by the gift of Christmas JOY. So there’s hope for all of us. Our lives can be filled with JOY--but only on God’s terms.

Still, we try to get JOY for ourselves. We believe we can, so we pursue joy in all the wrong ways...and in all the wrong places.

Many people believe that if they can just manufacture enough happiness for themselves, or, on the other side of that coin, if they can protect themselves from enough unhappiness, they will somehow find JOY. But this only leads to disappointment.

Listen to the wisdom of the great preacher, **Harry Emerson Fosdick**, in something he wrote many years ago:

“A heart of joy is never found in luxuriously coddled lives, but in men and women who achieve and dare, who have tried their powers against antagonisms, who have met even sickness and bereavement and have tempered their souls in fire....

If we were set upon making a happy world, we could not leave struggle out or make adversity impossible. The unhappiest world conceivable by man would be a world with nothing hard to do, no conflicts to wage for ends worthwhile, a world where courage was not needed and sacrifice was superfluous.”

Don't you think what Dr. Fosdick said is true? I do. It's just that we have a hard time living like we believe it. Otherwise, our search for joy would not lead us into so many selfish pursuits.

We forget that Jesus teaches that JOY finds us, rather than the other way around. He said this happens, though, only as we take the focus off ourselves and put it on others.

We can be like **the pilot who became hopelessly lost** while flying over a desert. As darkness fell, and his fuel ran low, he began searching desperately for the lights of the airport.

He saw a blinking light on the horizon. Relieved, he turned his plane in that direction, but only to soon discover that he was flying toward a rising star. He turned his plane toward another light—but it was also a star.

This happened several times. He would see a light and be hopeful. But hope was quickly followed with disappointment. Fortunately, the pilot did finally make his way to the airport—only minutes before his fuel ran out.

He later told about his frightening experience: **“There I was,” he said, “hopelessly lost in the vastness of the night, going from one light to another, desperately seeking that one light that could bring me safely home.”**

I wonder how many people in our world experience something like this in their lives--chasing one bright object after another in hopes that this will be the one that will lead them to a place of joy and contentment. How many times do they get disappointed?

How often does something like this happen even for those of us who should know better? Followers of the Christ who came at Christmas have discovered, and we must always remember, that JOY comes to us...only...as a gift.

Think about the nature of gifts. I realize that we often speak of giving gifts to ourselves—whether at Christmas, or other times—but can we really do that? I don't think so.

Which leads to this: just as we often forget that **JOY** is a gift—which means we cannot give it to ourselves--we may just as easily forget where joy comes from--that **JOY is a gift to us from a loving, gracious God.**

Remember how the Christmas story goes. The angel didn't tell the shepherds out in the field to pursue JOY on their own.

Instead, he tells them that JOY has come to them and to all people as a gift—as God's gift in the form of a baby. They were to go and find Him; and in Him, they would find JOY!

God still offers us His JOY through the gift of the Savior. God sent His Son to this world to invite us to a way of life that is joyful.

Don't overlook the JOY in Jesus' life. Even with all he endured--frustration, disappointment, death on a cross--JOY remained one of the defining attributes of His life.

He was criticized, you may recall, by some hyper-religious folk for being too JOYFUL. They accused Jesus of being a glutton and winebibber because he enjoyed good company and good food.

His best-known sermon—the Sermon on the Mount—do you remember how it begins? It starts with the Beatitudes—a description of nine ways in which we can be truly happy and blessed.

Everywhere He went, Jesus communicated the joyful assurance of God's never-failing love and care. He was the giver of JOY to people back then, just as He is for us today.

But maybe you don't feel all that joyful. Perhaps you're questioning if it's really possible for you to experience in your own life the promised gift of JOY.

Well, it is possible! For those who know Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord, the sources of JOY are many. Here's one: it's that inner stability that FAITH brings to our lives.

Life comes with no guarantees—you've no doubt noticed this. We do any number of things to protect ourselves—we have lots of options today: various insurances, security systems, and the like.

The truth of the matter is, though, **there is nothing we can put in place to perfectly protect us from the challenges and heartbreaks of life.**

Faith doesn't protect us from these either, but it does provide us with a way to cope. Jesus brings to our lives the understanding that our well-being is not at the mercy of happenstance. We realize that life consists of much more than just the stuff that happens—whether good or bad.

A confident faith in God, the conviction that His grace will be sufficient for us whatever we face, brings to our lives an inner stability--a certainty which enables us to withstand whatever the world "dishes out."

Through faith in Christ, our lives are undergirded with an inner peace and joy that remain—regardless. Only a deep, abiding faith can provide us with such an enduring foundation.

This JOY we have in Christ Jesus cannot be taken away. It's deeply rooted in who we are and what we're about in this world. **God sent us His Son so that we would not be doomed to live directionless lives. We find life's purpose in Christ.**

We allow His example to lead us and His grace to sustain us; and now, finally, we know what life is about. JOY is what we find when we say "yes" to Christ's invitation to come and follow Him, and then faithfully live out this calling each day.

Now, we can't skip this part--this matter of daily "living out" our calling in Christ. **It's possible, you see, to miss the JOY of Christian living by taking too lightly what Christ means when He invites us to come and follow Him.**

We fail to recognize that Christ is talking about changing our focus in life away from ourselves and toward God and others.

He wants us to be spiritually whole—to understand that God's gift is about finding JOY, not by pursuing it for ourselves, but by seeking instead to bring JOY to others.

Nothing about this is normal—or rational. This outward focus is different. This is why Jesus called it "new birth." It's a total transformation of our old way of thinking and being in this world!

How does it happen? It begins when we confess that our self-centered view of life is wrong—that it's sinful and displeasing to God.

The Christian Gospel loses a lot of folks right here—because they're not willing to confess anything—or change anything!

Pride can forever stand in the way of JOY—it does for so many. We arrive at JOY only as we travel along the pathway of humility.

It humbles us, friends, to accept the Gospel that in Jesus, God offers to forgive our sins and change our lives—because--this is what we need most. God does it this way because He knows it's the only way.

When we yield our lives over to Christ and let Him do His good work in us, there's JOY.

Finally, we can experience this Good News of Great JOY.

And like old Zephaniah promised, we now have every reason to rejoice and sing! Thanks be to God!