

Advent 3 C 2018

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Rejoice in the Lord always,  
Again I say rejoice.  
Do not worry about anything.  
God is near.

So wrote an apostle in chains,  
Under sentence of death.

Don't worry?  
It sounds good;  
Jesus said it too.

But, if you stop and think,  
Worry is really the only rational response  
To the times in which we find ourselves.

Yes, in our individual lives,  
Some of us,  
There are causes for celebration.  
Happiness is still a reasonable pursuit.

In terms of the wellbeing of the world,  
There are some indicators of changes  
That promote human flourishing.

But these are things we go looking for,  
Signs we point to,  
Straws to grasp  
Amid the flood of news that is all too real:  
Threats to democracy here and abroad,  
Threats to global health,  
To health insurance,  
Setbacks in the struggle for equality.

And in the midst of all this,  
The apostle,  
The teller of good news,  
Says,  
Rejoice.  
Do not worry.  
God is near.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone,  
Wrote the one  
Imprisoned by a power  
That was the essence of brutality.

Rejoice and sing,  
Rejoice.  
God is in the midst of you.

Like the apostle in chains,  
The prophet  
In a conquered city,  
Surrounded by disaster,  
Called the people to rejoice.

In the worst of times,  
Facing death,  
Conquered and overthrown,  
The prophet and the apostle  
Bring a message so startling,  
so radical,  
so beyond reason,  
that it is either folly  
or comes from God.

Rejoice.

Rejoice,  
Because God is near,  
God is here,  
And where God is,  
There is joy.

Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God.

What is joy?  
When does it surprise us?  
Where does it hide?

Lots of people are thinking about joy right now,  
Which is surely a good sign.  
If you want to go looking for joy  
There is a lot of current research  
And writing about how to find it and access it.

There is a newish TED talk<sup>i</sup>  
About joy  
That may delight and surprise you  
As it delves into the neuroscience of joy  
And pops bright pictures out at you.

Circles, bright colors, warmth,  
Houses with undulating floors,  
Twinkling lights in the dark of the year,  
All of these bring moments of joy  
Which we can seek,  
And cultivate,  
And share.

The sweet surprise  
Of our yarn bombed tree  
Is a harbinger of joy.<sup>ii</sup>  
Every day,  
People stop and stare,  
They laugh,  
They pose for selfies.  
Children point and touch,  
Make rings around the tree.  
It offers a pure burst of delight.

The world needs this kind of joy.  
When we participate  
In bringing this kind of delight  
To a sad and dreary,  
Scared and lonely world,  
We offer something precious.

But our faith tradition tells us  
there is more.  
More to treasure,  
More to share.

Our faith tradition tells us  
That joy is always a surprise  
That it comes unbidden  
At moments when reason would tell us  
That there is no cause for rejoicing  
And in fact that rejoicing would be folly.

That joy is pure gift,  
A shaft of light  
Piercing the darkness,  
A sign the life that is wider and deeper  
Than what we see, touch, taste and feel.  
This is a joy over which the troubles of the world  
Have no power.

The joy the prophets proclaim,  
Even in the midst of a conquered city,  
The joy the apostle claims,  
Embracing it with hands weighed down by chains,  
The joy that floods us without warning  
And transports us,  
Just for a moment,  
Into the beyond,  
That joy is beyond our control.  
We cannot court it or cultivate it  
Or even create the conditions for it.

It is not ours to give,  
But always ours to receive.

Rejoice,  
And again I say,  
Rejoice.  
God is near.

No message could be more startling  
At a time like this.

No message could be more startling,  
Or easier to dismiss.

Are we willing to be the people  
Who claim and proclaim,  
As the world frays and falters around us,  
Rejoice?  
Do not worry about anything.  
God is near?

Are we willing to seem that naïve,  
That out of touch with reality?  
To appear impractical,  
Foolish?

Now, right about here  
I expected John the Baptist  
To stride onto the scene,  
Calling down condemnation  
On those around us with whom we disagree,  
Bad actors, political opponents,  
Oppressors.  
Or perhaps, to be realistic,  
Calling me, or us, to account.  
You brood of vipers!  
I expected him to shout.

Wrath is coming.  
Repent!

These words,  
This harsh and frightening message,  
Would be taken much more seriously  
By the powers  
We want to wake up and shake up.

We could use these words,  
And it is so tempting to do so.  
You brood of vipers!

You who take away health care from millions.  
You who support wars that starve thousands upon thousands of children.  
This is how the prophets speak.  
They speak for God.  
They speak to God.  
They bring the concerns of the world  
To the careless,  
And comfort  
To the comfortless.

They condemn,  
They call out,  
They cry.

This is the prophet I expected  
To stride onto the scene,  
As he does in today's gospel.  
But he simply would not appear.

I tried to shoehorn him in;  
I tried dragging him by the camel skin,

I tried luring him with locusts and wild honey,  
But he would not appear.

And then,  
When I gave up,  
He appeared in the most unexpected place,  
Leaping for joy.  
A baby in the womb,  
Jumping up and down  
At the sound of Mary's voice.

Joy is the surest sign  
Of the presence of God.  
In the presence of the holy,  
Even before his birth,  
The prophet leaps for joy.

The prophets call for justice,  
For repentance,  
For action.  
Except,  
Except,  
When they call us to rejoice.

This is the most counter-cultural message.  
Rejoice:  
Lighting a candle,  
Watching the glory in the heavens,  
Following the star until it stops  
Over the place where joy abides.

This is the message  
That turns the world upside down.  
The message that makes us look naïve.  
The message that makes us look foolish.

The message that will save the world.

The God who comes among us as a baby  
Is the God who invites us to rejoice.

To let go worry,  
Fear, shame,  
Resentment.

Without joy,

We could be hard workers,  
And plod towards a reasonable resolution  
For some of the worries of the world,  
Some sensible compromise  
That would lead to a pretty good outcome.

Pretty good healthcare for some.  
A few habitats preserved  
So a few animals could survive.  
A few more members of congress  
Who strive for some kind of cooperation and progress.

This is honorable work,  
And in other arenas we may be called to do it.

But when we gather as people of faith,  
When we go forth,  
Strengthened and renewed,  
Fed and forgiven,  
Then we are called to be reckless,  
Fearless,  
Foolish followers  
In the way of joy.

Lighters of pink candles.  
Singers of hymns  
That sound silly in today's world.  
Bearers of the light,  
Casting aside worry and fear.

When we open ourselves up to joy,  
Let go the need to control,  
Let go trying to create conditions  
For everything to be alright,  
Then we are no longer constrained  
By all those things  
About which we are right to worry.

How would we not worry,  
When we look at the world around us?  
For that matter,  
How would we not worry  
When we look at the state of the church?

But God does not reside in worry.  
God lives in joy.

Joy that is not bound by our limits.  
Our limits are real,  
But in joy we transcend them.

Joy that is not darkened by our sorrow.  
Our sorrow is real,  
But in joy we fly beyond it,  
For a moment out of time.

So let's stay with joy today.  
There are times,  
More than enough times,  
To be sensible,  
To be rational,  
To respond to the demands of the times  
With passion, with action,  
With prophetic words  
And committed acts.

But not today.  
We are called to rejoice,  
And perhaps it is the most essential thing we do  
As people of faith.

Joy bears witness to the beyond.  
Joy is the hallmark of a world  
Overflowing with the glory of God.  
Joy is a glimpse into the more.

Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God.  
Here, always,  
Everywhere, now.

Rejoice.

---

<sup>i</sup> Where joy hides and how to find it (Ingrid Fetell Lee | TED2018)  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid\\_fetell\\_lee\\_where\\_joy\\_hides\\_and\\_how\\_to\\_find\\_it?utm\\_source=tedcomshare&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=tedsread](https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid_fetell_lee_where_joy_hides_and_how_to_find_it?utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=tedsread)

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. How yarn bombing grew into a worldwide movement (Magda Sayeg | TEDYouth 2015)  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/magda\\_sayeg\\_how\\_yarn\\_bombing\\_grew\\_into\\_a\\_worldwide\\_movement?utm\\_source=tedcomshare&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=tedsread](https://www.ted.com/talks/magda_sayeg_how_yarn_bombing_grew_into_a_worldwide_movement?utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=tedsread)