

Sermon December 13, 2015 Advent III "God at Work In Our Midst"
Zephaniah 3:14-20 Philippians 4:4-7 (Call to Worship) Luke 1:26-38

"Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!...." For the Lord your God is at work. God will bring you home...and will restore your fortunes before your eyes. (general idea of Zeph 3:14-20)

Zephaniah was for the most part a prophet of judgment, proclaiming to God's people that all they deserved was God's punishment. He called Jerusalem "the oppressing city that listens to no voice, accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God." (3:1-2) Even so, his words were inextricably interwoven with words of grace. God would act, and one day God would change the speech of the peoples to pure speech, that all of them might call on the name of the Lord and serve God with one accord." (3:9)

Everything depended on the character of God, both the judgment and the hope of the people. The people were told to trust God, to wait on God, even as things were very difficult in their lives. In a similar way, Paul commended the Philippian Christians to rejoice, even as they were in the midst of hardships. Paul wrote today's passage as he sat in prison, uncertain as to whether or when he would be released. But he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always.." He wasn't talking about a forced joy, or a "Polyanna" attitude. He - and Zephaniah - were talking about the joy that comes up like a spring in the midst of muddy ground or the plant that comes forth in dry, hard ground; the joy of knowing that God is at work in one's life and one's world.

Those who heard the prophet Zephaniah's cry to sing and rejoice were in exile, far from family, far from home, far from hope; they felt far from God. They had thought that God would protect Jerusalem, that God would not let the enemies tear down the Temple, that God would prevent his chosen people from being thrown out of the Promised Land he had given them. But God didn't. The message of the prophets, in fact, stated that God let all those negatives happen to the people of Judah precisely because they refused to obey and honor God. But then, far from home, in the midst of a message of how right it was for God to have permitted the devastation because of the people's faithlessness, there came also the promise that God would bring them back home and restore them. There was hope, reason for rejoicing.

"Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!" (3:14) Even when things are very hard, we can find a way to do this. I once talked with an elderly man who put things into perspective for me. "That old television and all the ad tells me to celebrate, and even my church sometimes seems like it is forcing me into a false mode of celebration for the Advent-Christmas season. I don't want to be forced into something I am not. I don't want to have touchy-feely falseness over this season. My wife died this year, and I am facing tests and surgery in the new year. I don't want people to push me into anything. BUT, I do rejoice, in my own way. Deep inside, I know that God is with me. I know that my Sarah is okay in heaven, whatever that is. I know that, no matter what the doctors find, no matter how badly I fall apart as I get older, I'm not alone. I even know that God loves me in spite of all the times I've messed up my life. For me, that's real cause for rejoicing. But don't force me into any sort of mold, in church or in a

shopping mall. I can have joy because of God, not because of what somebody else puts together." (pause) (source: memory)

Long ago, a young girl who was poor and who was engaged to a less-than-wealthy carpenter had a strange experience. An angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary and said: Greetings, favored one! God is with you... Don't be afraid, for God is pleased with you. And guess what! You are going to become pregnant and you will give birth to a son, whom you will name Jesus. God is going to give to Jesus the everlasting throne of David; of his kingdom there will be no end!" Mary asked, "How can this be? I am a virgin," the angel responded: "Don't be afraid. Nothing is impossible with God." And very perplexed but faithful Mary said, "Okay. Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be." Mary's life would never be the same again. She trusted that God really was working in her midst, and so, more than two thousand years later, we celebrate the strength of her faith as we celebrate the birth of her son. (Pause)

Christmas comes in twelve days. The cards and gifts we choose for others between now and then will speak of our caring for them, as will the money we give to those in need. These things can simply be challenges, or obligations, to press us into the man-made mold of the season where our "joy" is forced out between clenched teeth and ravaged wallets; OR they can be part of our re-enacting the story of God at work to offer forgiveness and love to a recalcitrant people punished into exile so long ago through a word of restoration; and to a worn-out, over-taxed, Roman-occupied people long ago, through a baby, that they might have hope to transcend the darkneses of their lives. That's what all of this church stuff is all about: HOPE, and the responsibility that comes with it when we accept it as our own.

"Rejoice always." In worldly terms, "to enjoy or to have joy" often means forgetting. "Forget all your troubles, put on a happy smile; eat, drink, and be merry; smile though your heart is breaking; play-act. In Christian terms, this actually involves REMEMBERING: to have true joy means to look honestly at the good and bad of life and dare to believe that God's hand is in it all. It is to look back over your life and remember how, when everything seemed dark, hope broke through for you. God was with you. God IS with you now, whether you see any evidence of God's presence or not.

The Bible is the promise that God is working to lead us home, to give us light in our very darkest places. If we are in prison, or in exile, or lost in a wilderness of our failures; if doubt feeds our fears and fans our angers, if we find we cannot love or feel loved, God gives us hope. For it was to just such a world as ours, just such a people as us, that the child was first given, to save us from our sins and to show us a better way.

"Rejoice in the Lord, again I say, rejoice." No false stuff needed, only a deep searching of our hearts. For in each life there is good cause for joy, if we will but realize it.

Back in the early 1990's, I met with a couple whose toddler grandchild had been taken to a NYC emergency room with a failed pacemaker. This couple didn't attend church, though they considered themselves to be Christian. And they habitually told people that they were living

under a dark cloud, that things in their life always came out negative. This time, they were finding lots of reasons for thanking God as they told me of their ordeal. They were especially moved by the condition of some of the other children in the pediatric intensive care unit of the hospital. Their grandchild could have surgery and leave with a reasonable chance at life. Many of the other children were not so fortunate, battling everything from "measles of the brain" to inoperable cancer. This couple was astounded by the courage and faith of the parents of the other children, and the way they kept clinging to hope. This couple found that they were now starting to count their blessings. They are also re-evaluating their own sense of hope in life.

There is much lacking and much overloaded in this world and in our lives. Many find life today stressful and frightening as the threats of terrorism abound and even our environment seems to be in peril. Our technological advances have forced us to hear the pain and angers of our world, but they have not made us kinder or given us much peace. In too many ways, our burdens can seem heavier than our blessings.

Then comes the Word: Emmanuel, which means "God with us." God is with us, even today in 2015. God is at work in our very midst, no matter who we are or how scared of life we may be. God is sufficient for all that is insufficient, in us and in this world. God is forgiveness for all that is unforgivable. God is Light for all who find themselves struggling in darkness.

For us, in our deepest, most painful and uncertain places, this translates into hope. God has acted to fully enter our lives in Jesus, and God continues to work in our very midst. Look at whatever it is that scares you or threatens to undo you, and then Rejoice in the Lord. You *may* rejoice, because you do not go through anything alone: God is with you.

May your joy never be false or coerced; may it well up out of your heart as God works salvation in your life, as you discover for yourself in powerful ways that God is at work in the midst of your life. This is God's promise, and our hope! May we receive it and share it with others. Amen.

Note: The actual preaching on 12/13/15 of this sermon took some liberties and thus did not always follow this document. - Florence Eddins