

Rejoice Anyway!

When you get right down to it, we've already heard the Good News this morning, haven't we? We've heard the Good News from the children of our congregation. We've heard the Good News of friends who have given generously in support of the work we are engaged in. We've heard the Good News of new friends come to join us and who are enabling us to live out our vision of health and wholeness for children and families by living out their own very similar vision and calling. We've heard the Good News in the lighting of the "Joy" candle and we've heard our choir singing the Good News of the joyful tidings of the angels announcing the birth of the Christ Child. There has been lots and lots of Good News this morning.

So, what I am going to say will be short and somewhat superfluous. But I want to remind us for just a couple of minutes about the Good News that comes to us from the Scriptures – both those that came before the birth of that child and those that came after his life, death, and resurrection. I think these particular readings are apt for us this morning because they are reminders of joy for God's people in times of trouble. And all the Good News we've heard here this morning notwithstanding, these are indeed troubled times.

You are certainly to be forgiven if you've never before heard our first reading this morning. The book of the prophet Zephaniah is short and often overlooked and many who think they've heard of it are confusing it with Zechariah. There are only two other readings from Zephaniah in the Revised Common Lectionary and they're pretty bleak. I've never preached from Zephaniah before but this reading really captured me. In part, I think it's because of what Zephaniah was facing. The first verse of his book tells us that he received the word of the Lord during the reign of King Josiah of Judah and many scholars think he likely spoke during the early days of that reign. It was a difficult time in Judah. The Assyrians, who had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, were still powerful. Their empire stretched from their homeland in the north all the way to Upper Egypt in the south. The little kingdom of Judah had to pay tribute every year to remain unmolested and many of the people had followed the kings before Josiah in worshipping the gods of the Assyrians rather than the God of Abraham. Zephaniah spoke out against the violence and the fraud that were rampant in Judah.

Most of Zephaniah's short book is his warning from God against those who assume that the fall of Israel and the plight of Judah mean that the God of Israel and Judah is powerless, that God's laws are to be ignored. Zephaniah warns those who, in his words, "say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good nor will he do harm.'" For all those who take advantage of their neighbors, who spill innocent blood, who use their government or religious positions to enrich themselves rather than caring for those who look to them for leadership, there will be consequences.

But a day is coming, Zephaniah promises, when even the haughty ones will learn the lesson of the humble. A time is coming when those who have rebelled against God, those who have lied, those who have been the source of fear in others, will turn to God and God will remove their shame. Then, says Zephaniah, in a close echo of the passage from Micah I cited last week, "they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid." Because that day is coming, Zephaniah calls on his countrymen to celebrate in advance, to sing and shout and rejoice and exult. Zephaniah acknowledges that things are a mess. He warns that those who are contributing to the injustice and to the terror that seem to rule the day will not escape the results of their actions. But the people of God are encouraged to rejoice anyway. A better day is coming.

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The second passage I read for you should have seemed far more familiar to those who gather here on a regular basis. My benediction most Sundays comes from a slightly different translation of Paul's words to the church in Philippi, often with topical insertions by me. But it's worth remembering the context of this passage, too, since we don't hear that every week. To begin with, Paul wrote these joy-filled words from prison. Scholars are divided on the exact circumstances but it's possible that Paul was in Rome, awaiting his hearing before Caesar. It's likely that he was facing execution, possibly beheading, likely preceded by the kind of beating and ill-treatment that we would now call torture. He was writing to a church that, like nearly all churches in nearly all times, faced internal dissention, some bad behavior, concerns about the future, and the disdain of the surrounding culture. But what is the climax of Paul's advice to the Philippians? "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

My sisters and my brothers, I need not belabor the point this morning. We live in difficult times. Like the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the days of Zephaniah, we see that many of our elected and religious leaders, as well as the corporate titans who are rulers in our day, take advantage of their positions to enlarge their own wealth and further their own agendas with very little thought for those who are least, lost, or left out. Like those Judeans we may feel that we are surrounded by ancient enemies who take pleasure in our fear, who exist only to terrorize the vulnerable. Like the recipients of Zephaniah's truth-telling, we are horrified at the corruption and the fraud and the greed of our society. Like Paul, we know too well the truth that those who are bold in their faith can be discarded by society, even, in the worst circumstances, beheaded. Like the Philippians, we may feel we have cause to be nervous about the future.

But we are called to rejoice anyway. Zephaniah was right. God has taken away the judgments against us. We are, as we affirmed in our Call to Worship, blameless in God's sight. The king of Israel, the Son of David, Jesus is with us for he was and is Emmanuel, God With Us. No matter what life brings, we need fear disaster no more, for God is on our side and rejoices over us with great gladness. We are called to rejoice, just as Paul said, for the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keeps our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

We have seen and heard much this morning that leads us to great joy. And we know that when we leave this place and plunge back into the everyday world with all its worries and tragedies and sorrow and fear there will be much to pull us away from joy. But the word for us this morning is rejoice anyway! Remember that not only is the Lord coming but he has come! He came to that manger in Bethlehem and to those dusty roads in Palestine and to that cross and that tomb in Jerusalem and he changed everything. Remember that not only did the Lord come but that he is coming! He is coming every day in our hearts to help us change and to help us change the world around us and he is coming at the end of all things to dry all tears and to bind all wounds. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Rejoice anyway! Rejoice! Thanks be to God. Amen.