

Zephaniah 3:14-20
 Luke 3:7-18
 Philippians 4:4-7

Third Sunday in Advent, Year C
 Midway Presbyterian Church
 December 12, 2021

Rejoice and Sing

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson today is from one of the so-called “Minor Prophets”—minor because they were short. Made up of just three chapters, the book of Zephaniah was written to be read (and reread) by those able to do so, and to be read aloud to that vast majority who could not read. It concludes with “A Song of Joy.” Listen to these words from Zephaniah 3:14-20...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson for this Third Sunday of Advent, Luke illustrates the substance of John the Baptist’s message in the wilderness about Jesus—a message delivered to people who have expressed anew their allegiance to God, and who will now return home to live transformed lives. Listen to these words from Luke 3:7-18...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson this Sunday, Paul is writing to the church in Philippi—a church that the Apostle had established in a leading city of the province of Macedonia and the urban center of a Roman colony. Paul concludes the main portion of the letter with words of exhortation and a call to rejoice. Listen to these words from Philippians 4:4-7...

Sermon

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
 shout, O Israel!
 Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
 O daughter of Jerusalem! (Zephaniah 3:14)

Song has long been a medium of expressing hope and freedom. At the time of the American Revolution, “Yankee Doodle” was one of many songs that would inspire Americans in their cause. Many of the old spiritual songs come from the longing of slaves to be free. Like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Ostensibly based on Elijah’s ascent into heaven (II Kings 2:11), this African American spiritual also expresses the enslaved people’s hope that they might find deliverance across a river (for example, in the free states beyond the Ohio River):

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

So, who was this Zephaniah that called the people to song? In the first verse of chapter one of this prophetic book we read:

The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah.

The time frame is somewhere between 640 and 609 B.C. Now we know that things had deteriorated to a sorry state by the time Josiah ascended to the throne. And prior to that, evil Manasseh had occupied the throne for almost half a century, with a resulting decay in faithfulness and morality.

Thus does the prophet foresee coming a terrible day of judgment, a bitter “day of distress and anguish...of ruin and devastation...of darkness and gloom...of clouds and thick darkness...of trumpet blast and battle cry.” (Zephaniah 1:14-16)

How astonishing then, to next hear words of hope and joy that would follow the debacle of exile. Yes, an awful price would be paid for their sinfulness. But now there is a word of hope, a word of promise. Judgment will be transformed into gladness. Cries of sorrow will become choruses of joy. Jerusalem shall sing, for her sentence has been commuted and her enemies disbanded. Now God will rejoice over Jerusalem, and Jerusalem will be praised by the peoples of the world. For a faithful remnant will be established. A people who could be counted on to keep alive the promise of God for others to hear and trust.

And of course, the roots of this rejoicing lie not in the strength or goodness of the people, but in the grace and benevolence of God. Therefore can they replace their fear and anxiety with confidence and strength.

Now it's appropriate that this joyful song of promise in Zephaniah 3 is heard on this Third Sunday of Advent. Because on this day the penitential purple of the season changes to rose or pink, (thus the pink advent candle) as we celebrate "Gaudete (gaw·day·tay) Sunday." Gaudete is from the Latin imperative, meaning "Rejoice"; so it is literally "Rejoice Sunday." And the blessed Virgin is praised, celebrating her virtue and use as a vehicle to the Incarnate Lord.

Our Gospel Lesson from Luke 3 presents a summary narrative of the preaching of John the Baptist. Though it's hard to imagine, John the Baptist is called the patron saint of spiritual joy. First of all, he leapt for joy in his mother's womb at the presence of Jesus and Mary. (Luke 1:44) In John 3 (29-30) we read that John the Baptist rejoiced to hear the bridegroom's voice.

But think of it—crowds of people were coming out to hear John, from all over Israel. John baptized his cousin Jesus, launching the Lord's public ministry, but also heralding the demise of

his own career. He could have been jealous and envious. He could have felt threatened—like the Pharisees and Sadducees. But John actually encouraged people to follow Jesus:

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’ (John 1:29-31)

John was like the best man at a wedding. Yes, it is an honor to be chosen as best man, but the best man does not get the bride. According to Jewish custom, the best man’s role was to bring the bride to the bridegroom, and then make a quiet exit. But John found joy in the role. And thus did he play his part well.

My joy is now full. He must increase and I must decrease. (John 3:29b-30)

No doubt part of that joy came from the humility of John the Baptist. Humility is not debasing yourself, denying that you have any gifts, talents, or value. John knew he had an important role to play, and he played it with confidence and authority. But his focus was not on himself, but on the Lord.

But what about John’s blunt call to repentance? Is that Good News, worthy of “Rejoice Sunday!” Yes, because John calls for a repentance that leads to life. Because repentance is all about humility, and humility is all about freedom. And freedom leads to peace and joy—in the presence of the Bridegroom. In a benedictory farewell, the Apostle Paul urged the Philippians:

Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice. (Phil. 4:4)

Lutheran theologian Martin Rinkart was born in Eilenburg, Germany in 1586. He received theological training in Leipzig and held several positions before returning to his hometown as an archdeacon. He served there for some thirty years, most of the time during the Thirty Years War.

Now Eilenburg was a walled city and therefore people came from miles around seeking refuge. But overcrowding resulted in famine and pestilence. One pastor left and two died, leaving Rinkart to minister alone. And during this time, he would conduct funeral services for as many as forty or fifty people in one day.

His own wife succumbed to the pestilence, while he himself survived an illness. Sadly, the minister received little support from the town authorities, and eventually was even harassed by them. Exhausted, he died on December 8, 1649. But his legacy was not only his wonderful example of unselfishness and devotion, but his great hymn, “Now Thank We All Our God.” In a world of death, Pastor Rinkart wrote a prayer for his children to utter to the Lord. In the midst of tragedy and suffering he wrote a song of promise. We’ll sing it shortly as our second hymn.

It is the custom in some churches during Advent to sing the Song of Mary—“The Magnificat.” We find it in Luke 1:46-55, when Mary, the mother of our Lord, went to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. That song gives voice to God’s care for the poor, the hungry, the humble. Johann Sebastian Bach interpreted this great hymn in his beautiful cantata, which he also called “The Magnificat.”

And Mary said,
 “My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name. (Luke 1:46-49)

It was her baby, Jesus, who would give real meaning to Mary’s song. For he was the fulfillment of the promises of mercy which God had spoken to patriarchs and prophets. By his humble life, and terrible death, and precious resurrection, this Jesus would give new hope to the world. And yes, he would become the Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world.

While Christmas jingles like “Frosty the Snowman,” “Rockin’ around the Christmas Tree,” or “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus,” are fun, they have no message of promise or hope. But “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Now Thank We All Our God,” “The Magnificat,” “Ave Maria,” “Silent Night,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Joy to the World,” or “O Holy Night”—they do not fade when Christmas ends. When the tree is taken down and the candles are extinguished. They hold out hope and joy and peace that abide, from day to day. And from year to year. Until our Lord comes again in joyous victory.

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!

Amen. And Amen.