

“Share the Joy”

Based on Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Luke 3:7-18

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As you can see, purple is the liturgical color of the season of Advent. The other season that has purple as its color is Lent. Both of these seasons are understood to be a time of reflection and preparation for celebrating markers in the ministry of Jesus, his birth and his resurrection. Lent, of course, has a heavy emphasis on repentance, giving something up for Lent, committing to a more robust spiritual practice, giving to those in need. Many people incorporate fasting into their Lenten practice.

Advent can be like Lent for us, just not as severe. First of all, how can anyone really practice fasting right now with all the holiday parties? And let's face it; there is something about colder weather that prompts our bodies to fill up on those comfort foods to pad us up so we can get through winter. How's that for a rationalization for overindulgence? Advent doesn't have the same intensity as Lent, but it is a time of preparation. We are reminded that even as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we also anticipate his second coming. Are we ready for the Lord's return? That's one of the lingering questions through Advent. This is a season, which falls at the end of the year, when we are invited to take stock, reflect on where we are in our life, what we need to let go of and take on in our discipleship. Advent can have a Lenten feel. Thus the color purple.

But today we see that the candle in the Advent wreath which was lit is not purple. It's pink. That's because this candle symbolizes joy. And why not? The bright and colorful lights and decorations, the Christmas carols, the parties and get-togethers, this is a time, even though the days are shorter and the nights are longer, to lift up our spirits and *en-joy* the holiday season. Yes, this time of year can be hard. Some of us grieve loved ones who won't be celebrating Christmas with us this year. But why linger in the gloom? All around us are invitations to give

in to the magic of the season, to fill our hearts with joy. So we acknowledge the joy of this time of year on this Sunday.

The passage from the prophet Zephaniah definitely has the theme of joy. “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” Why? Because “the Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.” Further on, the prophet declares, “the Lord...will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” The prophet says, “the Lord will save the lame, gather the outcast, change their shame into praise.” Singing, rejoicing, praise. This is the ninth oracle in the book of Zephaniah. The first eight are full of gloom and doom. But in the end, at the ninth, an ode to joy erupts and the oppressed and beaten down people are given reason to hope for a glorious future when God will set things right. The Lord will come. Their salvation is drawing near.

So let’s see where joy shows up in John’s preaching as Luke has recorded it. John begins his sermon by shouting to the crowd, “You brood of vipers!” Well that’s a fine way to start a message, by calling everyone in front of you children of snakes. He then asks in what seems to be an accusatory manner, “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” It’s almost as if John wished that they didn’t know what was going to happen so that when the Lord came they would be all wiped out for their sinfulness. Isn’t the joy in John’s message palpable? What is amazing is that the crowd didn’t just get up and leave. In fact, they engage John by asking what they need to do so that they don’t get wiped out by the coming judgment. John then gives them specific instructions on what they need to do. And when the people began to wonder if John was the messiah, he sets them straight. He tells them that the messiah is coming, and he is bringing a winnowing fork and fire, to gather all the good people in his granary and cast the bad people into unquenchable fire. A joyful message? Well, that would be hard to affirm.

Yet, at the end of today’s passage, in vs. 18, Luke writes, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” What good news? I don’t know about you but when I have gotten good news it usually begins with “congratulations” or “we are pleased to

inform you.” I have never gotten good news that began by calling me a son of a snake. Have you? Where exactly is the good news in John’s sermon? Can joy be found in this message? I am going to try to convince you that when Luke called John’s sermon good news that he didn’t say that tongue in cheek but actually meant it.

Have you ever worked at a place where the supervisor or an accrediting agency shows up unannounced to do an inspection? If so, you may have noticed your heart rate speed up a little bit. Your brain kicks in as you wonder, “Uh oh, is everything in order? We weren’t prepared for this!” You all may remember about a month back our district superintendent showed up with her husband for worship. It was great to have her with us. And I had no idea she was coming. Now I know she wasn’t here to do a formal inspection. We have a good, professional relationship. But my heart still skipped a beat. Surprise inspections do generate some stress. We would like to have some advance warning.

The good news in John’s sermon is that he is letting the people know that the inspector is on their way. And it’s going to be a formal inspection with profound consequences. So before the inspector arrives with his winnowing fork, his axe and unquenchable fire, you all better look at yourselves and get yourselves together. You better repent and show fruits of repentance before he gets here. The good news here is that there is time to get ready. They, we, have been warned. We have time to prepare for the coming of the Lord. We have time to straighten ourselves out. So that’s good news.

Would it be fair for you to be held accountable for your actions without it being made clear to what you are being held to account? You go in for your annual performance review. Sitting across from you is your boss with a scowl on their face. Looking at you they say, “Joe, you need to do a better job. If you don’t improve in the next three months, we will have to let you go.” The natural question to ask would be, “Sir, what specifically do I need to focus on?” The boss says to you, “I’ll know it when I see it. You just need to focus. Do your job. Get to work.” Could have been more specific.

The good news with John is that when asked the question, “What should we do?” he gives specific answers. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” OK, we can work with that. We can share. A tax collector asks what he needs to do. John tells him to only collect what is due. The soldier asks what he is supposed to do. John tells him not to extort and be satisfied with his wages.

Now let’s look at this for a second. First off, it is interesting that the two specific occupations addressed are tax collectors and soldiers, two occupations that represent the oppression of the empire on the people. Tax collectors and soldiers, who are likely local mercenaries, are betraying their people by facilitating oppression. You would think that when they ask John what they should do, that John would tell them to quit their jobs and stop facilitating oppression. But he doesn’t do that. Instead, he basically tells both of them to stop exploiting people for personal gain.

Here’s the other thing. In my studies, I learned that in those days, tax collectors had to pay the state for the privilege of collecting taxes. In order to cover the expense, they would add a surcharge to the taxes they collected. And they were free to make that surcharge whatever they wanted. The system was designed to add economic suffering on to the people. And, of course, it also made tax collectors especially despised because everyone knew that the tax collectors were taking advantage of them. So John tells the tax collector to only collect what is owed. But how are they supposed to then make a living? To answer that question, refer to the first answer John gave. If someone has two coats, they must share with those who have none. If the tax collector, doing the right thing, lacks a coat or food, they must depend on the generosity of the people whom they are taxing. That’s some radical interdependence, isn’t it?

What about the soldier? He has to be satisfied with the meagre pay he gets as a mercenary. So how is the soldier supposed to make ends meet if his salary isn’t enough? He has to depend on the generosity of the people he is maintaining control over. I wonder, how might that impact how he does his job? I can imagine that if I as a soldier had to

depend on others to provide my family food if I wasn't getting paid enough by the empire that I would probably not be a mean soldier but cut the people some slack, ease their burden, try not to be oppressive to their movements and daily living. I would want the people to be happy to have me around instead of seeing me as the arm of the state with a boot on their necks. As it turns out, a sharing economy actually undermines the oppressive nature of the system which the empire designed. If these agents of the state only do what is required and rely on the people for their daily sustenance, then they would naturally maintain a soft approach and ease the burdens on the people as much as possible. And that is good news indeed.

It would be depressing and demoralizing to hold the belief that in the end it doesn't matter how you live. Life is just one thing after another and then you die. Lights out. As Kansas puts it, "All we are is dust in the wind." As the preacher in Ecclesiastes put it, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." It is depressing to think that your life will make no lasting impact. You won't be remembered. Most of us don't know the names of our great-great grandparents. Why would you or I be different? More than likely all of us gathered here will one day be forgotten. It will be as if we never existed. Ugh.

But that's not what John believes. The prophet casts for us a vision. It is a vision of the messiah with a winnowing fork in his hand. All the grain has been harvested. And the messiah is throwing the grain up into the air with his winnowing fork so that the lighter chaff will drift away in the breeze. Then all the chaff-free wheat will be gathered up and stored in his granary. All the chaff left behind will be swept up and thrown into the fire. What does this mean? Maybe it is a vision of the last judgment. Those who have repented and bore the fruits of repentance are the grain that will be gathered together. But those who have not repented will be thrown into the fire to burn forever. Or maybe it is a vision of sifting, and all that is not who we truly are will drift away as chaff so that, having been purified, we will be gathered into the Lord's granary. Maybe it means something else. But the important point here is that for John how we live now does matter. It certainly matters to God. We will not be forgotten. Certainly not by God. We will for

eternity be in God's memory. That alone is a comfort. This vision that John offers up is a vision of hope. It is a vision that says to us that how we live now has everlasting consequences. It matters not if our names are inscribed in the annals of history or that people thousands of years from now will be speaking our names. When the Lord comes, we will be gathered in, having borne the fruit of repentance. And that will be a day of rejoicing. John's vision of future judgment is good news.

But it's more than just what happens to you after you die. How we live now really does make a difference, for good or ill. To live our daily lives as John directs, by being satisfied with what you have and sharing with those who lack, this is a fruitful way of life. It is a life that is infused with joy and gratitude.

Maybe you have heard of this wealthy business man who goes by the pseudonym "Secret Santa." Right around this time of year he comes up with ways to secretly distribute thousands of dollars. This year, he recruited a black, middle aged, homeless man to be the one to distribute \$100 bills. The man stood on the street with his sign and his cup asking for donations. And as is typical for those who beg on the streets, most people walked right on by without even noticing him. But sometimes people would drop some money in his cup. And when they did, he would say to that person, "Hey, hold on a minute. I have something for you." And he would hand that person a \$100 bill and express appreciation for their generosity and invoke God's blessing on them. This exchange usually ended with a hug, and even a few shedding of tears.

One man dropped some coins in the homeless man's cup and then received his \$100. He is a father of seven. And he was financially burdened himself, worrying about how to provide presents for all his children. That \$100 made a big difference. The homeless man gave 5 \$100 bills to a homeless mother of three and told her how much he honored her dedication to her kids, to do everything she knew to do to care for them during this difficult time in her life. The secret Santa, of course, paid the homeless man \$500 for helping him share his wealth. He claimed that money as an opportunity to start fresh. In those moments of sharing, strangers were gathered into an embrace, and

anxiety and burdens, like chaff, drifted away. Tears of joy flowed. This homeless man, and the secret Santa who made it possible, will not be forgotten any time soon by those who were touched, whose lives were impacted for good.

As we move closer to Christmas, as 2018 nears its end and we turn the page into 2019, now is a good time to reflect on how we are living our lives. What fruit are we bearing? Now is a good time to listen to John's call to repent where needed, to bear fruit of repentance, and to be assured that when the Lord returns you will be gathered in with all who have lived a good life. In these darkening days, what can you and I do to sing and rejoice with all our hearts? How can we spread joy to others? Now is our time to share some good news.