

Living In Peace

Bible Reading:

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Philippians 4: 4-7

Luke 3: 7-18

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Peace on earth.....

Goodwill.....

Joy to the world.....

Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and hand and voice....

And so we Canadians hurry, trudge or perhaps, stumble into another Christmas season.

Rejoicing, as Kathy shared with the children, is the theme of this, the third Sunday in Advent. AND of our Scripture readings.

"Sing. Shout. Be glad and rejoice!" says Zephaniah the prophet.

"Rejoice...." says the letter to the Philippians.

I don't think there's a single one of us here who doesn't want to be able to be in a life position where we can do that.

Where joy can set the tone for our life.

a positive outlook, a calm delight and gladness in life.

In this season of gift giving there is no gift so valuable as real joy .

So, as the pink candle of Rejoicing flickers in our Advent wreath, consider this theme with me. Consider it in three steps, steps guided by the opening words of our reading from Philippians 4:4

REJOICE

IN THE LORD

ALWAYS

I invite you to reflect on joy through the Old Testament lens of Zephaniah 3.

Sing aloud.... shout.... rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.

If you read the whole prophecy of Zephaniah, you'd see immediately that these are the first really positive words in the entire thing.

The rest of the book hangs as a very dark cloud over the ancient Jewish people, as the prophet describes a time when God is going to abandon his people to life on their own; when He will leave them. And they'll discover that when they're cursed with that fate,

with living life on their own resources

with their own protection and defenses

they'll be staring death in the face.

Yes, it's a dark prophecy.

It wasn't that God had some twisted sense of delight. Rather, the prophecy is so hard hitting because the people of Zephaniah's day wouldn't pay attention to anything less. They had sunk into such a spiritual stupor that anything less would have slid right by without the scarcest blink of an eye.

But, having made his point, the prophet points them in the direction of God's true intent - the direction of God's heart for His people:

>> a desire and a longing to have His people experience real joy.

God wants his people to be able to experience -

a positive outlook;

a calm delight and gladness in life.

Rejoice!!

and

as Philippians 4 brings it to the next level

Rejoice..... in the Lord.

Which is exactly where Zephaniah goes, too.
Have a good look at v.17 of his prophecy.
Can you see the picture that he paints with words?

God is right in the middle of his people.
 rejoicing.
 renewing.
 exulting over them.

Human rejoicing and positive living finds its energy, hope and stamina in the replenishment that comes from Heaven; a replenishment that God gladly gives.

 He gives it to them as One who is in their midst.

Yes, with Him present, their lives are in good hands.

 They don't have to worry any more about what's around the next corner.

 Their future is certain.

 The final outcome is sure.

 And the road to get there is mapped out for them.

As it is for you and I when we surrender our lives to Christ.

Many of you know that one of the biggest drains on human energy is fear.

 Fear paralyzes.

 Fear empties us out.

The presence and the power of God gives us strength, gives us new energy, gives our hands the ability to get moving again;

 hands which, as v.16 suggests, would otherwise be weak.

Rejoice.....

 in the Lord, who, says Zephaniah - in right in your midst (v.17).

This season we celebrate the coming of the Lord, the King.

Very literally right in our midst.

 Jesus, the Son of God, who came to live as a human being.

 Among us.

 With us.

 For us.

Jesus, who said, "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love..... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*" [John 15:9-11]

 Joy is found when we centre our lives around the Saviour.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that cars are made to run on gasoline. They don't run properly on anything else, like kool aid or coffee or beer. God has designed the human machine to run on divine fuel. Jesus is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn..... There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about Christ. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from him, because it is not there. There is no such thing.

 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 1952) p.50

Country music star Travis Tritt spent many years playing out-of-the-way joints before he made it big in the music industry. He reports that many of the bars were dangerous places, with drunk fans starting fights over the smallest matters. But Tritt found a unique way to keep the peace in such situations. He said:

"'Silent Night' proved to be my all-time lifesaver. Just when [bar fights] started getting out of hand, when bikers were reaching for their pool cues and rednecks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing 'Silent Night.' It could be the middle of July—I didn't care. Sometimes they'd even start crying, standing there watching me sweat and play that song."

Twang! The Ultimate Book of Country Music Quotations, compiled by Raymond Obstfeld and Sheila Burgener (Henry Holt and Company, 1997), p. 47

Is that just a story about cheap seasonal sentimentality?'

Perhaps.

But perhaps it points to something far deeper.

Something far more mysterious.

Something very real – something that breaks even through the haze of cigarette smoke, booze and loud bar music.

Maybe it points to the longing that people have for a real Presence in their lives.

And the truth of Christmas about that Presence

the Presence of Jesus Christ, God's Son

- ready to enter our hearts and lives.

Someone said to me recently,

"Since I let down my guard and opened my life up to the possibility of Jesus I have found that my anger has gone down, I'm more at peace with myself, and more able to take whatever life throws at me."

See?

That person has discovered the secret -

Rejoice.....

.....In the Lord....

AND

I said we were building today's message in three stages, based on the opening line of Paul's words to the Philippians.

Remember the third part?

Rejoice.....

.....In the Lord.....

.....always.....

Real joy is not found in some

be-happy pop psychology approach to life

it is not found at the punch bowl of good cheer

at the X-cube controls

or in the bar.

It happens when we take the risk, opening ourselves to the very real, strong presence of Jesus;

and

then begin orbiting our lives and actions around His will and desire.

Recognize the presence of God among you in Jesus Christ.

And build your life on that, people of God.
Lean on that day by day.

Lean on it in a way that Zephaniah's neighbors didn't do.
Oh, from time to time they'd come back to faith,
back to worship,
back to God.

But, you could almost set your clock by the speed with which they'd forget about it soon after and slip right back into going hard after filling their bank accounts, getting ahead of their neighbor, and relaxing beside the pool.

It's the story of their entire spiritual history –
Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold.....
Up, down, up and down like the Peace Tower elevator.

Zephaniah stands at the end of that fickle, cyclical history.
In fact, he is the last prophet before the Jewish nation collapses and is carted off into captivity.

Zephaniah's word is that there can be no joy,
there can be no peace
there can be no freedom from fear
apart from a surrender of one's life to God.

a surrender -
not just for a while
not just for a part of the week or a year or two
not just as some formality that occurred at some point in the past.

But for sure.
For real.
For keeps.

And **there's** the challenge for us.
To play for spiritual keeps.
It's a challenge because we Canadians have a tough time doing that.
I'm not talking just spiritual behaviour.
I mean behaviour in general.
We have trouble hanging in for the long haul - playing for keeps.

Recently we all went through the big Eastern North American blackout. We were urged to conserve. And people did. Even the lights in office towers, which somehow seem to be mysteriously installed without off/on switches, went dark. Everybody talked about the need to conserve long term. We were all going to be a bit more careful. Turn down the heat. Turn off the lights. Cut back with the appliances.

That was then.
Guess what - someone found the "on" switch for the office tower lights. They're blazing all night again!

Just like after the first energy crisis in '73.
Oh, we were all going to drive smaller cars and have more efficient homes and be much more careful.
Look at the size of vehicles we drive 30 years later, and the size of the monster homes. Conserve?

Why is stability so hard to live out?
Why is consistency so elusive?

My parents tell me that during the second world war, churches were full.
As soon as the war ended, they began to empty.
Someone said, "*In the trenches of war, there are no atheists.*"

Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold.....
Up and down like the Peace Tower elevator.

Friends, we live in a very affluent city. A very pretty city. Lots to do here. A safe city. Active, humming community. Great place, Ottawa is.
But what do you think all of that can do to a person's spiritual life?
Which direction do you think it will tend to push it?

Let's not be too surprised by all of that.
Rather, aware of that, let's hear the Word of God.
Joy is found when we have the Lord right in the centre of our lives.
Not only in our words.
But also in our actions.
At the centre - consistently.

Which is the whole point of John the Baptist's message.
John the prophet is calling the people to a spiritual commitment that shows in a sustained lifestyle.
Where what is sung on Sunday gets lived on Monday.
Where the words of the morning prayers affect the afternoon's choices.
Hence the stuff about sharing coats, fair taxes, satisfied living, no extortion and the like.

Hear the echo of Paul, in Philippians 4, as he says to his readers - "*Rejoice in the Lord.... Let your gentleness be known to all.*"

The Greek word that Paul actually used for "*gentleness*" is hard to translate. Some English texts render it as "*Gentleness.*" But others says, "*good sense.*" Or "*magnanimity.*" Or "*considerate.*"
It has imbedded in it the idea of a generous treatment of other people.
Live clearly and widely that kind of generosity, says Paul.
This is what God seeks.
This is what delights God.
This is what he blesses by pouring out gifts of peace and joy.
And only this.
Real, sustained, deep joy can be found no where else.

If you're not sure - go sit in a coffee shop somewhere, or a Chapters book store, and watch the people.
How many genuinely peaceful looking folk do you see? Or as you ride the bus or walk among the suits downtown? How many grim faces do you see in our rich but very secular city?

We work harder.
We are among the richest people in the world.
Our houses of prayer are emptier than ever.
But you tell me - are we more peaceful or satisfied as a result?

Advent offers us rejoicing and peace.
And it offers us the encouragement to orient our lives, and set deep roots for an orientation towards the Lord.

For peace that lasts beyond the end of the seasonal parties.
the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
which will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

That, friends, is God's deep desire for you.
To give you peace. To guard you in peace.
In how you feel, and how you think – your whole life.

It begins with surrender.
It grows through committed lifestyles..
And it will be completed on the day when we stand in eternity before the King.

If you have never consciously opened your life to Jesus, then do what that one person did whom I quoted earlier -
Take a risk. Do it today.

If you have done so, may I invite you to review your lifestyle.
Would *gentle, generous, open, sharing* be words used about it?
Is the love of Jesus, who gave everything up to come to earth
reflected in a lifestyle that holds everything loosely; a lifestyle of an open hand?
Or is it a lifestyle of a closed fist; protecting, taking, hiding, holding?
If so, may I invite you to join me in trying to live a little more freely
a little more openly
a little more gently
trusting in Christ to provide the protection
and inviting Him to take fuller control.