

As We Wait, God is With Us
Zephaniah 3:14-20, John 1:6-9, 14-15, 19-34
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We're in the season of cheerful lights, lively parties, tantalizing treats, gifts and surprises. From all appearances, it's a time for pure fun and pleasure. I learned a new word this week for the spirit and activity that bubble up at this time of year. It's called *jollification* which sounds like a made-up word to me, but it's really in the dictionary, and it means lively celebration with others or merrymaking. At this time of year, with all the *jollification* going on, theoretically, it should be impossible to be in a bad mood, right?

I'm sure *none* of you have been in a bad mood at any point since December 1. No one has felt overwhelmed by some situation you're dealing with. No one has gotten on your nerves or hurt your feelings. No one has gotten mad about something you heard in the news. No one has been aggravated in traffic. If you've managed to be consistently upbeat that's amazing, but I can tell you that *I've* been in a bad mood at *least* a few times even with all the jollification of the season. I can think of two times I was in a bad mood just since Thursday!

One thing I've noticed about myself is that when I get in a bad mood or I'm feeling down, sometimes I'm not that inclined to try to change my attitude. Sometimes I don't feel like cheering up, or looking on the bright side, or trying to find the silver lining. My bad feelings have a way of perpetuating more bad feelings, and I just want to mope. *Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I guess I'll go eat worms...* It's that kind of attitude. I think all of us know what that's like, but as tempting as it can be, it's not good to stay in that place, and sometimes we need the people who love us to come alongside

us and help us find our way up out of the pit and back into the light. We need friends who will tell us “cheer up,” not because they are being dismissive of how we feel, but because even when we’re sad- sometimes especially when we’re sad- we need to be reminded that there are good things in our lives that are still good even though we’re temporarily in a bad place.

If in this Advent season of waiting and the cultural season of jollification you are feeling down or inclined toward moping, today, the third Sunday of Advent known as Gaudete Sunday, comes to us like that needed friend who urges us to cheer up and be glad. That’s what Gaudete means – to be glad or rejoice. And, like the friend who reminds us that there are good reasons to cheer up, Gaudete Sunday also helps us remember the reason we can rejoice. One of the big ways that this Sunday does that for us is by lifting up John the Baptist.

Our Gospel reading in John began at chapter one verse six where John the Baptist is introduced. We are told that he was sent from God, and he came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. John’s God-given purpose and calling in life was to announce the incredible news that we read in verses 14 and 15. The Word became flesh and lived among us. In John 1:1 we find out who the Word is when we read, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word *was God*.” John was chosen by God to prepare people to see, and recognize, and receive God in the flesh, and that’s what we see him doing in the first chapter of John. When people came asking who he was, he wasn’t interested in talking about who he was. Instead, he said, “among you stands one whom you do not know...whose sandals I am unworthy to untie.” When John saw Jesus coming toward him, he pointed to him and told everyone, *that’s him! That’s the person you need to pay attention to because that is the person that you have been waiting for.* The profoundly good news that John was called to announce was the

good news that God has come and is right here with us. It's good news that changes the world and it changes us too when we believe it.

Can you think of a time when you waited and longed for the arrival of someone who was important to you? When I was a child, my grandparents lived in a different state, and when I knew they were coming for a visit, I couldn't wait. I still remember watching for their car and running out into the driveway when they drove up, excited to greet them even before they could get out of the car. And think about those stories that you see on the news sometimes that show someone returning home from a military deployment. You see people running toward each other, and tears, and long embraces. Sometimes there may not be an emotional connection to the person that you're waiting for, but that doesn't make you less eager for them to get there. There was a time we got home from our beach vacation a few years ago in the middle of summer, and when we walked into our house it was about 90 degrees because the air conditioner had gone out while we were gone. The AC man couldn't come until the next morning, but I could have kissed him when he got there. In all these situations, the arrival of that person who was needed and longed for sparked a response and that response was joy. The Bible tells us that John the Baptist even had this response to the arrival of Jesus when he was still in utero. When pregnant Mary came to visit Elizabeth, John leapt in his mother's womb. As a baby in the womb, John didn't *choose* to feel joy when Jesus came around, and joy wasn't something that I decided to feel when my grandparents arrived. When the army spouse sees their husband or wife after a year-long deployment, they don't have to stop and tell themselves to be happy. The arrival and presence of the person is itself the reason that hearts leap, and tears flow, and joy fills hearts.

This is exactly what we see again in Zephaniah. Zephaniah is a short book of the Bible, only 3 chapters. For most of the book, the prophet warns Judah and the surrounding nations that they are going to come under judgment, but the book ends with the good news that God will bring blessings on the other side of the judgment. After all their troubles and hard times, the Lord promises to restore Jerusalem and one of the key features of that restoration is the arrival of the Lord who will come to live and be present among the people. That's when the rejoicing begins. When the Lord arrives to rescue and be with the people. "Rejoice O daughter Jerusalem...the king of Israel, the Lord is in your midst."

When we understand the relationship between the arrival of God with us and joy, then we can understand that when this third Sunday of Advent comes around like the friend urging us to rejoice even if life has us down, it is not like the conversation between Lloyd Dobbler and his sister in the movie Say Anything. Lloyd says to his sister, "Why can't you be in a good mood? How hard is it to decide to be in a good mood and be in a good mood once in awhile?" She glares at him and says, "Gee, it's easy." We aren't being urged to "just be in a good mood." We aren't being nudged to *do* anything except recognize and remember the good news that God has already come—not only to dwell among us but to dwell within us by the Holy Spirit. Our advent devotional hymn that we sang before the sermon gives expression to the yearning in our hearts for the presence of God with us, and that yearning is fulfilled when, like the hymn says, "love creates a place wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling." God is with us now and that is the reason that joy is always available to us – because it isn't dependent on our circumstances or our mood. It is simply a reality that comes when God is with us.

That is the truth and yet I'll be the first to admit that there are many times when I feel that I have lost my joy. The weight of the world

just feels too soul-sucking and demoralizing. Instead of rejoicing, I find myself complaining and instead of feeling jubilant I feel numb. In those times I sometimes wonder if I really am alone, or I wonder, why, if I'm a Christian, don't I feel more joyful? The feeling that we've lost our joy is real, but it's not the final truth because joy is dependent on God and God's faithfulness and God's presence. In reality, Jesus has promised never to leave us or forsake us. He has promised to stay with us and within us, which means that our joy can't be lost. So why do we feel like it gets lost?

I think it has to do with the ways that we tend to wander away like the sheep Jesus talked about who wandered away from the shepherd and got lost. As the saying goes, God doesn't move but sometimes we do. When we wander away down the paths of worry, or busyness, or self-indulgence, or other things, we can begin to *feel* a distance between ourselves, and God and we can become less aware of and attentive to God's presence with us. We may be listening to so many other voices that it becomes difficult to listen to and hear the still small voice of the One who is with us. That can be the reason that we feel like we have no joy, but that is where the voice of John the Baptist rings out loudly for us today.

John's ministry was about helping people recognize that God was with them in Jesus, and today that is the message that is being proclaimed to us. The awakening of joy in our hearts is about recognizing not fixing. When things aren't going well and when we aren't feeling good so often that's the first instinct. What can I do to change the circumstances? How can I make things better for myself or for the people around me? We feel the burden of having to fix things, and it's a heavy burden because we can't always fix things, but we are reminded today that we can stop and look again in the direction that John the Baptist points us which is toward Jesus. As we move from this day into the final days and weeks of Advent waiting

and anticipation, that is the invitation. Remember that God has come to be with us, and Jesus has promised to be with you.

I have a practical suggestion to share with you that I thought of this morning when I was going upstairs, and I saw this decoration sitting in the windowsill. Because I had been thinking about this message, when I saw the little joy sign I instantly had the thought, “God is with me.” We see this word around in a lot of places at this time of year. You might see it on your coffee cup, or in lights in someone’s yard, or on a Christmas tree ornament, and my practical suggestion is to let this word, whenever you see it in these places help you remember and recognize that Jesus has come and that he is with you. Let decorations like this be like a little John the Baptists everywhere, pointing you to Jesus and reminding you that God is with you. When you see the word, say to yourself, God is with me, or even better, listen and hear the Spirit saying it to you.

When Jesus was with his disciples on the night of his arrest, he spoke to them of leaving and they were afraid, but he gave them reassurance saying, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love....I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:9,11). Joy does not begin with us. It begins with God drawing near, and God is already here. Whatever our circumstances and in our good moods and bad ones, may we know the joy of the Lord and may it truly be our strength. Amen.