



## **Surprised by Joy**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**

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*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, God has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.*

*On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in love; God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*

*I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.*

*At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes.*

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Several middle-aged men sit in folding chairs in a circle. The caption beneath the cartoon reads, “Guys without gift ideas support group.”

The leader of the group asks, “Leo, how do you *feel* about Wallace not finding anything for his wife except a toaster?”

Leo says: “It makes me feel better. My treadmill idea beats that by a mile.”

Sometimes a Christmas support group sounds like a good idea.

When the Puritan Oliver Cromwell ruled England he outlawed Christmas. He was not the last religious person to think this holiday has gotten out of hand.

Did you know December 25th was not chosen because it was on Jesus’ birth certificate, but because that was the date of the biggest party of the year in Rome and Christians wanted a

celebration of their own? Some Christians think it is time to give Christmas back to the Romans.

We do not need to see the tree at Rockefeller Center again. We do not think peppermint mocha is a real flavor. We do not care if the cashiers say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays” as they return our credit card.

Buying gifts at all seems unnecessary. Most of us are well-fed, clothed, and housed. When someone asks, “What do you need?” the answer is “We don’t need anything.” If we really needed something, we would buy it. That is why we exchange presents that no one needs—bacon-scented air freshener, an inflatable unicorn horn for your cat, or a Gertrude Stein stein.

On Christmas Day, the phrase most used in many homes is not “Merry Christmas,” but “I have the receipt if you want to send that back.”

Ebenezer Scrooge grumbled, “If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.” We have moments when Scrooge is not that hard to understand.

Sometimes our weariness is the result of frustrations that will pass before the tree is taken down, but we also have good reasons to be sad.

For someone whose life is hard, Christmas can make it harder. For those who are facing Christmas for the first time—or the tenth time—since a loved one has died, almost everything reminds them of the one whose stocking is no longer hanging on the mantle.

Our sorrows—the ways in which our lives are not what we wish, the difficulties of being single, a tension-filled marriage, troubled children, aging parents, jobs that feel like dead-ends, and our many shortcomings—are magnified at Christmas.

Six hundred years before the first Christmas, Judah is in terrible shape. Assyria, the latest in a long line of super powers, is threatening again. One hundred years earlier they conquered

Israel, the northern kingdom, and took the Israelites into captivity. Judah paid taxes to Assyria to keep them from invading the southern kingdom.

Zephaniah almost seems to enjoy pointing out how terrible things are. The prophet criticizes their shallowness, hypocrisy, and arrogance. He pictures God traveling the streets of Jerusalem with a lantern to find bad people and punish them (1:12). Zephaniah sounds like Stephen King when he writes, “The people will soon walk like the blind. Their blood will be poured out like the dust.”

The first two and a half chapters prophesy a judgment of such dimensions that even nature is destroyed—“in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed” (3:8).

There is not much to sing about, and yet the prophet finds hope. He ends his gloomy diatribe with this glorious song, this call to celebrate God’s presence: “Come, worship, sing, shout, rejoice with all your heart. For no matter what comes, God is with you. God sings and dances. God celebrates the poor being loved, the outcasts being welcomed, the journey home that we share.”

The prophet pictures God breaking into song. Can we even imagine God singing? The prophet invites us to celebrate even when things are at their worst. It is often in the hard times that God’s people recognize that God is with us.

Think of Mary rushing to Elizabeth’s house. Mary, about whom there are so many misconceptions—pun intended—is a pregnant, unmarried teenager. She is worried about being a mother and worried what her mother thinks.

Imagine Mary and Joseph approaching the hotel clerk who tells them, “There’s no room in the inn.”

Joseph pleads, “But she’s pregnant.”

The innkeeper says, “That’s not my fault.”

To which Joseph replies, “It’s not my fault either.”

Mary will soon be a homeless parent. A wicked king will try to murder her child. And yet, Mary sings: “My soul

magnifies the Most High. My spirit rejoices in God. God remembers us with love and mercy.”

God’s people rejoice even where there seems to be little reason. God’s presence matters more than circumstances. Christmas is not a party for those who smile the most. Christmas is for those who have experienced tragedy and discovered that sadness is not the last word.

Wendell Berry writes, “Be joyful, even though you’ve considered all the facts.”

The joy of Christmas is a defiant “nonetheless” that does not deny sorrow but overcomes it.

In *Never Too Late to Be Loved*, Browne Barr tells about the last year of his marriage. As his wife’s terminal illness progresses, the Barrs have to deal with their feelings about death and faith and each other. As a result, their time together is gracious and joyful. Near the end of her life, Elizabeth talks about the prayers that sustain her.

She smiles and tells her husband, a Congregational minister, “There’s too much Baptist left in me, because I’ve been talking to Jesus a lot lately. I know that Jesus isn’t sitting on the deck beside that pink petunia. But it’s easier if I think about him and see him and hear him when I talk with God. That’s lots better than trying to have a conversation with the wind in the trees. Jesus has ears. And you know Jesus speaks English.”

When Browne asks her what she prays about, she says: “Mostly the children. I know they’re all grown up, but there’s not a day that I don’t worry or wonder about one of them. It’s amazing, how in a week or so it all seems to work out that they all get equal time. Except they get cheated on the days when I’m most worried about you or upset about some stupid thing the (government) is doing. Jesus and I have lots to talk about.”

When he asks what she thinks about dying, she does not answer at once. “It’s sort of strange,” she says at last quietly, but her voice isn’t somber, it’s light and loving: “I really don’t.

Somehow whenever I think about death, God's just there. I feel God all around me. God's just there. The Everlasting Arms, I guess. So close."

Real joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God's presence. It takes most of us a while to figure that out.

When I was a six-year-old in Sunday school, one of my favorite songs was "I've got the joy." I do not know who wrote the words, but it sounds like it could have been penned by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Down in my heart to stay."

The first stanza alone is enough to qualify the song as a classic, but the best part is the last verse: "And if the devil doesn't like it he can sit on a tack. Ouch! Sit on a tack. Ouch! Sit on a tack. Ouch! And if the devil doesn't like it he can sit on a tack. Sit on a tack to stay."

The last stanza was wonderful not only for the lucidity of the poetry and the insightfulness of the theology, but also for its participatory nature. We began the song seated. Then when we shouted "Ouch!" we jumped out of our chairs.

When it was over all the six-year-olds rolled on the floor and laughed uproariously at how accurately we had depicted what it would look like if the personification of evil did indeed sit on a tack.

When I was eleven years old, Three Dog Night recorded a song entitled *Joy to the World*. The first line was not "Joy to the World, the Lord is come" but was instead—and those of you who have as little musical taste as I have will remember this—"Jeremiah was a bullfrog, was a good friend of mine. I never understood a single word he said, but I helped him drink his wine."

The last line was equally memorable, "Joy to the fishies in the deep blue sea and joy to you and me."

I bought the '45 record, put the little plastic disk in to make it fit our stereo and, for the first time, invited my mother into my room to listen to a new record: “Look, Mom, I bought *Joy to the World*. That’s one of your favorite carols, isn’t it?”

My mother was so pleased. She suggested, as I hoped she would, that we listen to it. Mom left during, “I never understood a single word he said” long before “Joy to the fishies in the deep blue sea.” I rolled on the floor and laughed uproariously.

Now when I sing of joy it is in a different key. I no longer find much joy in taunting either the devil or my mother—though both of those activities may have their place. Joy is now less like uproarious laughter and more like sustaining hope.

Some things are not as simple as they once were. I realize now that not all of my dreams will come true. I have seen some people I care for hurt terribly. I have a few scars of my own. Some of the people I have loved have died. When we realize that life is hard, and will not be everything we have hoped, our joy either fades away or goes deeper.

Most recent hymnals include *Joy to the World*—the Isaac Watts version, not the Three Dog Night version—but, like our hymnal, they omit the third stanza: “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.”

The editors think congregations do not enjoy singing: “Far as the curse is found.” But it may be that Isaac Watts understood that real joy is found on the other side of the sorrows that grow and the thorns that destroy. Real joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God’s presence. God is the great joy deep inside us—the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts.

So wrap the packages. Turn on the Christmas lights. Trim the tree. Enjoy the calories. Laugh out loud. Dance. Celebrate. And be surprised by God’s joy. God is with us, so sing joyful and triumphant. And if the devil does not like it, he can sit on a tack.

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*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

