

3 Advent, Yr. C.

December 16, 2018

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

This third Sunday of Advent is often called Gaudete Sunday, because that's the Latin word for "rejoice," a consistent theme in the day's readings. It's also called Rose Sunday; hence the rose colored candle is lit today.

If we think of rejoicing as the theme of the day, then, at first glance, it seems that Luke with his story of John the Baptist didn't get the memo. I think it's in there, but it's not as obvious as in the other readings. It's front and center in Zephaniah, Isaiah and Philippians.

The background to the Zephaniah reading is that of a country just emerging from the grim regime of the Assyrians. While almost the entire book is about judgment and punishment, in this section the prophet reminds the people that they have come through great suffering and now it's time to rejoice. And he lists the reasons – God has turned back your enemies; the Lord is in your midst, so you no longer have to fear disaster; the Lord is rejoicing over you

and renewing you in his love; the Lord is saving the lame and gathering the outcasts and restoring your fortunes.

In like manner, the Isaiah reading occurs at a time when a war has probably just ended. The message is that you can trust the Lord, because he saves you. And because of that trust, you don't have to be afraid, you can rejoice.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, context is also important. The community was struggling with threats from without and within. There were raging doctrinal disputes from outside preachers; within the community, two core leaders were fighting. And if that wasn't enough, Paul is writing the letter while he's in chains, awaiting transfer to Rome and his eventual execution.

So, when these writers are talking about rejoicing they certainly aren't coming from a place of denial – pretending that there is no suffering, doing the ostrich-like head in the sand move, or acting like Pollyannas. How can you say 'rejoice' when you're in the middle of chaos and suffering? And I think here, once again, we need to remind ourselves of

the difference between JOY and happiness. Happiness is tied to circumstances. If things are going well in my life, I'm happy. But joy and rejoicing are much deeper than external circumstance. Joy is more about that attitude towards life that understands and trusts that God is in charge and that God's goodness and love will have the final word. Joy is grounded in our relationship and trust in this living and loving God. Our trust in God who says that he has us by the hand and will never let us go. Do you remember the Bishop's sermon when he talked about the uncle who would always scare the socks off the kids when they were watching Lassie by telling them that he wasn't sure that Lassie was going to make it this time..."I don't know, kids, it's looking pretty bad for Lassie," etc. The Bishop said that when the kids got a bit older they could see through him and they KNEW that Lassie was going to be OK, no matter what. It's like knowing the end of the story and that all will end well. We, too, know the end of the story and, because of that, we can live lives of joy. I read a story written by a priest who said that she had baptized an older man and when the baptism proper was over and just as she was

about to anoint him with the chrism, he looked her in the eye and said, rather incredulously, “You mean now I am permitted to have joy and wonder in my life?” She said that she responded by saying “Yes, now and forever more!” And they embraced and laughed and he danced her around the font – the first any only time, she said, that she remembered having done that! But there it is, the picture of joy that is ours, simply by virtue of being a son or daughter of God.

There’s a lot that pulls us in the other direction, though. This joy that we’re talking about isn’t a surface emotion. It is, as we’ve said before, a stance toward life that has known suffering and has transcended that suffering. Fear is the temptation; fear pulls in the other direction. We maybe aren’t suffering from the existential fears about day-to-day survival that many around the world are facing, but we, too, are tempted by the fears that face every human being: we’re weak, powerless, insignificant, we’re not enough, not good enough, not loved enough, God isn’t with us, the enemies of God are winning. When Diana, Pat and I were at Fran’s funeral, we were approached by a woman who was

obviously struggling with some of these fears. She told us about her sister who had informed her that unless you could say, out loud and with total conviction, JESUS CHRIST IS MY LORD AND SAVIOR, you were not saved, and were, presumably, on your way to hell. There's not much that one can say in that kind of very short time to reassure someone and to get them to perhaps re-examine their assumptions about something so central. But it was clear that she was worried and anxious and NOT rejoicing!

And perhaps that's a good lead-in to the Luke reading with John the Baptist looking out at the crowd and calling them a brood of vipers. I think it goes without saying that starting out that way is a bit problematic. But, for whatever reason, the people stayed to hear what he had to say and, in spite of Luke's telling of John's sermon, with its ax at the root of the tree, and the winnowing fork and the chaff being burned with unquenchable fire, Luke says that they stayed and listened as John proclaimed the good news to them. We talked last week about why this would be good news – that there was time to turn around and be reoriented toward God. There

was something that one could do; that one's life was not futile. And we hear that this morning, because after that rather off-putting beginning, the people there asked, "What then should we do?" And John tells them – in pretty simple terms. What he tells them reminds me a bit of that book that was popular some years ago about learning everything we needed to know in kindergarten. SHARE, BE FAIR, and DON'T BULLY. Wherever you find yourself, do the loving thing. If you have more than you need, share with someone who doesn't have enough; if you're in a position where you could take advantage of someone (like the tax collectors, who could take as much as they could get and keep whatever they didn't have to pay to the Romans), don't do it; and if you have power, don't use it to intimidate or bully. It reminded me of George H.W. Bush, whose life was recently commemorated. Remember his thousand points of light? It's like that – be the light that's needed wherever you are, whatever you're called to do.

And we can do what we're called to do, not from a spirit of fear, or from some thought that God will punish us if we don't, or from some thought of the

need to prove ourselves worthy of God's love. Instead, we can do it standing firmly on the knowledge that we're already loved, already saved. We can do it with a spirit of thanksgiving and rejoicing. I remember once saying something like this to an aunt who was in her late 80's and who was a pretty staunch Catholic. When I said all that, she looked at me quite quizzically and rather doubtfully and said, "Does the Pope know about this?" I'm guessing that he does.

And I'm thinking that all of you do, too and, so, in a way, I'm preaching to the choir. But it never hurts to look again at our lives, to re-dedicate our efforts at loving and by doing what we can to participate the coming of the Kingdom.

A story to close and to illustrate. It was sent to me by my daughter. It's an article that appeared in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel and it's about a zip code in that city where poverty and crime and lost lives are prevalent. Wisconsin has the highest rate of black incarceration in the nation and this part of Milwaukee is described as ground zero. And then Andre Lee Ellis moved into the neighborhood and

things began to change. Almost by chance he started a program that engages boys from 12-17, which he sees as the most vulnerable age, when poor choices and lack of guidance can ruin young lives. The program is about creating box gardens in the neighborhood, growing vegetables that are given away and also about volunteers who mentor these kids, giving them a place to talk about their lives and their fears. And it's about hope and turning young lives around. News about the program is spreading; the article quoted one woman who's a resident of Mequon who brings 6 dozen cookies for the boys every Saturday morning. There's now a board and an attempt to organize the program so that funding is more than catch-as-catch can. When the reporter on the story first met Ellis, he was singing an old Negro spiritual: I am on the battlefield for my Lord. And I promised him that I would serve him till I die.

Ellis must asked that question, What then should I do? And this ministry was his response. My prayer is that Ellis and those he's serving and saving are living in joy. As may we all. Amen