

Zephaniah 3:7-18 12.09.21 3 Advent Pastor Bill Uetricht

“It don’t mean a thing, if it ain’t got that swing. Doo-wop, doo-wop, doo-wop.” If it don’t hop, if it don’t jump, if don’t pulsate, if it don’t lead to movement, to dance, if it isn’t full of joy, that song ain’t worth a thing—so sang Duke Ellington many years ago. I think the Duke has the right spirit for today, the third weekend of Advent.

In the history of the church, this weekend has been called the *Gaudete* weekend. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for rejoicing. Advent, in the ancient church, like Lent, was thought to be a somber time, a time of great reflection and penitence. On the third Sunday of Advent, as on the fifth Sunday of Lent, early Christians were given a little break from the somberness, the hard work, the fasting of Advent. This was to be a weekend of joy, which is why we mark this time with a pink candle on the Advent wreath. The melancholy and reservedness of blue gives way to the brightness and joy of pink.

Today is a day of rejoicing, a day of joy, a day for the music to celebrate and swing. “Sing aloud, O daughter, Zion; shout, O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.” So says the prophet Zephaniah.

I have to admit that these words are a bit odd for Zephaniah, for the book of Zephaniah isn’t particularly happy. It’s not one that Joel Osteen would preach from often. When you read him, you might think Zephaniah is a bit crabby. He is a prophet who speaks a lot about doom, gloom, and judgment. He even gives you a picture of God destroying just about everything. For him, Israel, and frankly, all the nations have sinned terribly. Israel’s priests have been corrupt. The people have worshipped false gods. The rich have oppressed the poor. And in response, in Zephaniah, there is oracle after oracle of judgment.

But at the end of the book, in a movement of great surprise, in the words that are our first lesson for today, joy and rejoicing plopped onto the scene. God, Zephaniah reports, has “taken away the judgments against

you.” I don’t think that Israel has finally gotten its act together. Grace just arrives on the scene, just in time to end the story.

And the grace is an embodied grace, one you can see, touch, and experience. God gets happy. God gets the swing. Zephaniah tells us, “God rejoices over you with gladness, [renewing] you in his love, [exulting] over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” And if it is a day of festival, the music is turned up, the dancing is everywhere. God is singing as if he is at a party and all inhibitions are gone. God is moving, pulsating, dancing over his people, celebrating with them.

It’s quite an image, one that belongs to the spirit of Advent, especially on this day. Paul in Philippians today, like Zephaniah, is preoccupied with joy. He invites us to “rejoice.” And if we didn’t get it the first time, he says a second time, “Again, I say rejoice.” Joy is at the heart of this season. Joy is at the heart of our calling, and according to Paul, it is at the heart of our calling *always*, regardless of circumstances. Paul is likely in jail as he is writing the letter to the Philippians. He would know every reason not to be joyful. You and I are in the midst of a pandemic that is so stubborn and is accompanied by people who are equally stubborn. *We* have every reason to not to be joyful. I tend to be a joyful kind of guy, but I will be honest, joy has been evading me far too often lately. But Paul won’t let me off the hook. Joy was his calling and is our calling.

Why? Not because everything is good. Not because our situation, if we only have an optimistic spirit, is rosy. Not because the Christmas season is always easy. It’s not. We take on a lot, too much sometimes. We miss people. There are big holes in our hearts at the holidays. Our calling to be people of joy is not because the family is always what we expected it to be or wanted it to be. Come on! We all know better than that.

Yet Paul still says, “Rejoice.” Why? According to him, because the Lord is near. Now with those words he probably meant that he expected Jesus to return at any time. Jesus had been so important, creating such anticipation that the early church couldn’t imagine being without him for a long time. They thought he’d be back soon. And much of Advent’s anticipation has

been about that expectation. The song “Joy to the World” was written not so much to celebrate Jesus’ coming as a baby, but his return to make things right.

Now, let’s be honest. It’s been a couple thousand years, and he hasn’t returned. Maybe, therefore, we need to talk about the nearness of the Lord in different ways. In one of my favorite Advent sermons, a seminary professor of mine, Don Luck, speaks of the nearness of the Lord in terms of our living in a “God-haunted world.” He says that we live in a world “that points to something greater, something richer, something more ultimate than itself. Though God is not seen directly or clearly or without distortion, somethings of [God’s] presence and claims impact themselves upon every heart, so that it can never be said that any life is ‘god forsake’—nor any particular generation, nor any individual experience. All around us are glimpses of something greater than we already know.”

God is nearer than we know. God is closer than we often are aware of. God’s nearness, Luck says, is found in so many places, “in the sensate delight of the world—its shifting colors and the multiplicity of its forms and textures.” This is why we decorate our houses at the holidays, why we fix special foods, why we sing and listen to lots of good music, why we exchange presents. Oh ya, we probably overdo some of this sometimes. And I’m not sure it’s worth our while to get so anxious over our preparations. If we are, something is not right. But the small flairs of the season bear witness to something more beautiful, something more wonderful, something greater. In the sensate delight of life God draws near.

Luck also says that glimpses of something greater can be found in the dignity “etched by life-experience into the faces of the old, in the simultaneously gentle and yet strong depths found in the eyes of the wise, in the almost palpable energy that radiates from those who are life-loving and life-affirming,” and sometimes for me those often are the young.

These days, for me, that something greater can be found in the well-worn bodies and spirits of those who are working with the sick, who are caring for the dying, who are forced to deal with their own resentment and

anger with folks whose actions are wearing them, our health care workers, down. These folks and their service bear witness to something bigger and more wonderful than self-preoccupation, a truth which takes us to the odd, crusty, harsh and intrusive John the Baptist.

John is *the* great figure of Advent because he bears witness to something greater, to Someone whose life calls us to a greater measure of social justice. John is preparing the way for the one who will bring good news to the poor, set free the captive, welcome the excluded, forgive the broken, party with all kinds of people, especially the wrong kinds of people. And as John bears witness to this one, he, too, calls for greater justice. Don Luck says that glimpses of something greater, something more wonderful, glimpses of the nearness of God can be found in the “unsilenceable summons to establish greater measures of justice in economic, political, and social life.”

We meet the unsilenceable summons in John. The crowds want to know what they are supposed to do in order to prepare for the great unsettling to come, and John says: “Share what you have. If you are a tax collector, don’t rip people off. If you are a soldier, don’t terrorize people and, also, learn to live with contentment,” something that probably shouldn’t be spoken only to soldiers. Contentment is the calling given to all of us, especially those of us who frankly have too much. John’s message is quite simple. Getting ready for Jesus is a matter of making this world a better place.

In some ways, it seems that we have strayed a long way from the invitation to swing, pulsate, and dance. John the Baptist doesn’t seem like much of a partier. And while, as the Bible tells us, John didn’t “eat or drink,” meaning he spurned the excesses of the good life, he, nonetheless, understood the nature of *God’s* party. He realized that God’s party is not an exercise in self-protection or promotion. God’s party bears witness to something more than laurels or labels. Your ethnic background, your wealth, your great achievements, your religious connections—ehh, interesting but not at all ultimate. What matters in the party of God is that

everybody gets to come, everybody gets to swing, everybody gets to move with the music, rejoice with the One who is singing and dancing over us. The true prophets of God bear witness to a greater and more wonderful world. God is near in their longing.

*“With a song of joy, the buds shall break, with a song of joy, the seeds shall wake. May their song of joy be the song that you sing in your heart. With a song of joy, the old shall teach, with a song of joy, the young shall reach. May their song of joy be the song that you sing in your heart. With a song of joy, the doctors care. With the song of joy the nurses share, may their song of joy be the song that you sing in your heart. With a song of joy, the prophets long, with a song of joy, till we all belong. May their song of joy be the song that you sing in your heart. Joy will be the song. Joy will be the song. Joy will be the song in my heart. Joy will be the song. Joy will be the song. Joy will be the song in my heart.”* (Song written by Bret Hesla; words adapted by Bill Uetricht)

Rejoice. The Lord is near. Swing with God’s song of delight.