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December 16, 2018  
Advent 3: **Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7**  
“Unrestrained Joy”

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say it rejoice! Perhaps this biblical command feels jarring to hear in the midst of this season of Advent. This is the season when we expectantly wait for the coming of the Christ child, and often it is overshadowed by a rather somber, reflective mood. Today however, we lay that mood aside and clothe ourselves with radiate, undignified, contagious, radical, and excessive joy!

This Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, is known as Gaudete Sunday, as Gaudete is Latin for joy. It is named after the liturgy that begins the entire service by reading from Philippians 4 – Rejoice in the Lord always. Over the years then this has become known as the JOY Sunday during advent. Yes, we continue to expectantly wait for the coming of Christ. Yes, we continue to be guided into reflecting, repenting, and restoring. And today we shift to encompass it all, punctuate it all, and celebrate it all with the theme of unrestrained JOY! This is why today’s Advent Candle is always a shade of pink, setting it and this Sunday apart from the rest of Advent which is characteristically portrayed with colors of purple. The color change marks that something is significantly different about today.

Historically this Sunday in Advent brought with it a freedom of celebration and praise that was otherwise withheld during Advent. For example, in some contexts things such as flowers or organ music might be restricted during Advent. However, on the Joy Sunday they were permitted. In a way then this Sunday becomes an oasis of sorts, an in breaking and enlightening of God’s Spirit and presence of JOY.

The passage from Philippians was part of our November Dwelling in the Word series. During the series we discussed the differences between joy and happiness. So this morning when I declare to you, “Rejoice in the Lord always!” I am NOT saying “Be happy in the Lord always!” We must be reminded that joy is different than happiness. There is no way to *always* be happy and to live a life of integrity. However, one is able to always retain joy and live a life of integrity. It would also help us to remember that the joy that Paul speaks of is also listed as a fruit of the Spirit. This is not something that we have to manifest or manufacture within ourselves. Instead it is a result, a fruit, of allowing God to be at work in and through us.

Happiness is often contingent on what is happening around us. Happiness is often externally triggered as is unhappiness. However, joy resides much deeper and is not reliant on what is happening, but instead rests in the knowledge of who we are and whose we are. It makes me think of a song that is often sung in our house. It is a camp song from Amigo, I’m sure some of you know it. Some of the words go, “I’ve got joy down in my heart, deep deep down in my heart. How’d it get there? Jesus put it there and no one can destroy it, destroy, destroy it. Faster now! I’ve got joy....” There is a profound message in this simple, perhaps even silly children song. I’ve got joy down in my heart. Jesus put it there. And no one can destroy it.

This time of the year we sing “Joy to the World” and while that message hopefully evokes some smiles and good cheer, it also permeates deeper than that to communicate God’s redemptive plan unfolding amidst God’s creation. However, on this JOY Sunday, we not only want to remember the joy that we have, but to also remember the joy that God has when God considers us.

I was in high school the first time I remember coming across this passage from the Old Testament prophet Zephaniah. While I was a popular kid excelling in sports and academics, I

never felt like I could find my place or my niche. Who was I? Would I ever be good enough? Pretty enough? Loveable enough? Would I ever be enough? Talking to our youth of today I am reminded that they ask similar questions. Talking to adults today, I am reminded that we carry those questions of our youth into our years of adulthood. Am I worth it? Am I valuable? Am I enough? It was in the midst of these questions and in the midst of self-discovery that I read these words from Zephaniah.

Our scriptures are packed full of images of God. We read of God as shepherd, as warrior, as parent, as guide, as light. However, growing up in my congregation we never focused on this beautiful image of God as a rejoicing God. Not just a rejoicing God but a God who is so overcome with joy that God bursts into song over God's beloved. "Such joy is not subdued; it is not quiet or dignified. The Hebrew words used in verse 17 are used elsewhere in the Bible to describe great jubilation."i So on this Joy Sunday we speak of our joy, especially revealed as we ponder the gift, miracle, and mystery of the incarnation. And, we speak of the "joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world. God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And we, we who are wondrously and inexplicably God's beloved, join in the celebration."ii

The prophet Zephaniah delivered God's word during the reign of King Josiah. This book is only three chapters and two and a half chapters are filled with graphic and brutal assault on God's people who have welcomed other gods and worshiped other idols. If we went back and read the entire book we might find the words offensive and question God if perhaps the vocabulary is a little bit excessive. However, what would happen if God showed up in our lives today? Would God observe the ways we worship other idols? What might our idols be today? We don't call them Baal or Molek, but perhaps we call them financial security, personal choice, cell phones, the essence of family, a particular image we work to maintain. An idol can be

anything or anyone that is “loved more than God, wanted more than God, desired more than God, treasured more than God, enjoyed more than God.”<sup>iii</sup> When we put it like that I’m afraid that God’s visit today would reveal many idols in our lives. Like the Israelites the culture around us tries to point out everything that we need to be happier and more successful. And yet, God speaks to us about joy. Joy deep down in our heart that nothing can destroy.

The first two and a half chapters of Zephaniah then are filled with these words of God of judgment, pain, and confrontation. And then the book ends with an oracle of salvation, an oracle of hope, an oracle of joy. “Despite the people’s indifference, despite their hypocrisy, despite the cause for cosmic judgment, God’s entry into the world brings celebration, restoration, and new life.”<sup>iv</sup> The question is not whether we deserve it, or have earned it, or if we are enough, or if we are loveable. Instead the image is that of God delighting in us, rejoicing over us to the point that God breaks out in song! The God who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us takes delight in us with a joy that simply cannot be contained! Hear again these words of verse 17:

The Lord your God is with you,  
 The Mighty Warrior who saves.  
 God will take great delight in you;  
 In God’s love God will no longer rebuke you,  
 But will rejoice over with you singing.

God’s delight in us is borne out of God’s love for God’s creation. It is grace. It is unconditional love. It is joy.

Today in the middle of Advent I invite us to each simply sit and bask in this amazing image of God claiming each one of us and singing over us. What a powerful, profound, identity forming image of God. God will take great delight in you, and rejoice over you with singing. God singing for me. God singing out of God’s love and delight for me. For you. For you.

On this Sunday of joy we remember our joy as ones redeemed by the coming Messiah. On this Sunday of joy we celebrate the joy of a God who “is deeply invested in the life of the world. God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And we, we who are wondrously and inexplicably God's beloved, join in the (joyful) celebration.”<sup>v</sup>

This morning I invite you to join in this celebration by turning in your blue hymnal to number 318 to sing verse one of Joy to the World as the children come forward for children's time. Please also stand as you are able for this celebration.

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<sup>i</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Zephaniah 3:14-20,”

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=468](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=468)

<sup>ii</sup> Schifferdecker, “Commentary,” [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=468](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=468)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-idolatry>

<sup>iv</sup> Anne Stewart, “Commentary on Zephaniah 3:14-20,”

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2700](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2700)

<sup>v</sup> Schifferdecker, “Commentary,” [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=468](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=468)