

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 12:2-6, Phil. 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

I have never been the most sentimental about the Advent and Christmas season, that's not to say I don't enjoy it but the whole festive spirit of decorations and Christmas carols and parties has never been the highlight. As a child I enjoyed unwrapping candies on my homemade advent calendar, and while I would participate in the dressing of the Christmas tree, I don't remember ever being the most enthusiastic in my family, with my sisters being far more invested in putting up the tree ornaments that we have collected over the years. I certainly remember moments of wonder as a young child, when Christmas was a truly magical time, with thoughts of Santa Claus, reindeer and sleigh bells on the top of my mind, I remember asking for and receiving a sleigh bell for Christmas one year because I was so enamored with the story the Polar Express. But over the years that wonder and joy I have felt about the Christmas season has waned, as responsibilities creep in: where are we having Christmas dinner?; What presents should be bought?; How will we figure out Christmas services?... As we grow older there seems to be a flood of responsibilities and stressors that come with the Advent and Christmas seasons, and so often even though we talk about Joy there is little room for it in our daily lives. I think the same is true for the rest of the year too, so often we are overwhelmed by the realities of the world we live in that we find it hard to live out our call as Christian to be joyful. And yet we get glimpses of it: just last week we put up our Christmas tree at home, and my youngest who is now 18 months old was taking her nap while my wife, in-laws and eldest daughter decorated it. When my youngest woke up, and came downstairs her eyes sparkled in amazement and wonder, and she went up to the tree and kept on repeating 'wow' 'wow' 'wow'. To her the lights and decorations on the tree were a sight to behold, and for me the pure wonder and joy on her face were a sight to behold. Joy and wonder, marks of the Christian life so often elusive, but essential to what it means to live out our part in the Story of God.

All of our readings deal with what it means for Joy to be at the heart of the Story of God, three of them directly and our Gospel reading perhaps more obliquely. In our passage from Zephaniah we hear the call to "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart O daughter Jerusalem." In our canticle from Isaiah we are constantly reminded to "Sing praises to the Lord; to Shout aloud and sing for joy!" And finally in our passage from Philippians Paul commends the Church in Philippi to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice!" On the surface these calls for Israel, the Church in Philippi and for us to rejoice might seem to be merely platitudes, mere commands to be happy to smile and sing, and just pretend the darkness and pain of the world around us isn't real. So often when we talk about happiness today in our culture, it is a shallow happiness that doesn't wrestle with the difficult realities of life that quickly crumbles when faced with adversity and challenge. But joy is different, joy confronts the darkness and pain of the world and joy is like a candle shining in the darkness that casts light into the shadows of the world, and the call for us to live in Joy is far deeper than happiness, something we can come to grips with as go deeper into our passages today.

Our passages from Zephaniah and Isaiah today both come from periods in Israel and Judah's history where the threat of destruction at the hands of conquering armies was very real. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel were divided and both prophets warned of divine judgement against the nations for not walking in the ways of the covenant. The future looked bleak for the Israel, suffering and exile were on the horizon for God's people; and yet it is into this suffering and darkness that the prophets' promises of joy is set. Isaiah writes "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation." Zephaniah writes in a similar vein "The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more." And towards the end of the passage he writes "At that time I will bring you home, at that 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, says the Lord." The call of Joy

is not rooted in the people's decisions or the people's actions but rather in the actions of God. The **Lord** has taken away the judgements against you. Surely **God** is my salvation. So often happiness is rooted in ourselves or in finite things around us, things that can crumble when trouble strikes; joy on the other hand is rooted in God, in what God has done for us in the midst of suffering and despair, in the midst of exile and loss. Joy is rooted in the eternal, unchangeable God, and in our relationship with him.

Joy is at the heart of essence of who God is, it is at the heart of the Trinitarian relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and it is at the heart of creation. God created us so that we might experience the abundance of his overflowing love, peace, hope and joy and so we might spread them out into the world around us. Our purpose as humans is to enjoy God in worship and fellowship forever. And yet like Israel before us, we wander from the ways of the covenant, we wander away from God. We do the things we know we shouldn't do; we don't do the things we know we should do. This is Sin. This is what obstructs Joy from flooding the world, from overflowing in our relationship with God and with one another. And this is where our reading from the Gospel of Luke, with all its strong language and challenge comes in. John the Baptist's call to repentance, his harsh words against the scribes and Pharisees who came to be baptized, were a recognition of the harsh realities of Sin. Sin destroys joy, sin mars the life that God intends for us, and it is only as we recognize our need for repentance that we can be prepared for the Joy of God that we can be prepared for the ultimate source of Joy: Jesus Christ.

It is in Jesus that the words of the prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah are fulfilled: It is Jesus who has become our salvation, it is Jesus who has taken away the judgements against us and turned away our enemies. It is Jesus, who came among us first as a sweet innocent baby that is the Lord who dwells among us and so we need not fear disaster. To the shepherds in fields around Bethlehem the angels declared "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." Jesus, in the Gospel of John, said to his disciples that all that he taught them was so "that my joy might be in you, and your joy may be complete." The book of Hebrews states that it was "for the sake of the joy that was set before Jesus, that he endured the cross, disregarding its shame." Joy is at the heart of Salvation history. God's Story is centred upon filling the world with Joy and Wonder. Jesus is the Joy of the world, Jesus through his coming as babe on Christmas, Jesus through his death on Good Friday, Jesus through his resurrection on Easter and finally as we await his coming again, enables us to experience the Joy of God, enables us to marvel and wonder at the love, mercy and beauty of God. It is in sharing in the divine life of Jesus, through baptism and through our daily walk of discipleship that our lives can begin to be filled with joy and through us the world around us. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the saving work of Jesus Christ that we can live out a story of joy in our lives.

Living out the story of God's joy in our life does not ignore the reality of pain and suffering – happiness does that; rather God enables us in the midst of our suffering to experience moments of joy, moments of salvation, moments of grace. It's those moments, like my youngest daughter in front of the tree, where we can marvel and wonder at something bigger than ourselves, where we can stand in awe of something so great and yet relatable. Choose joy. Strive to make decisions that allow you experience the joy of God: with yourself, with others and with all of creation. Repent, offer and seek forgiveness, care for oppressed and marginalized, sing, laugh, revel in the company of friends and family. Take moments to enjoy the simple blessings of your life. Just as the first letter of John says that "we can love God because he first loved us" so to we can experience the Joy of God, because "for the sake of joy that was before him Jesus endured the cross." We are forgiven, we are reconciled, we are renewed, and so we await the coming of our Saviour in joyful expectation! Amen.