

Sermon Draft for December 15, 2024

Text: Philippians 4:4–7

Sermon: “Rejoice”

There's joy all over the readings this morning. Zephaniah cries out, **“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!”** (Zephaniah 3:14). Israel's joy comes from the Lord's deliverance: taking away their judgment, conquering their enemies, and promising to be in their midst. The Psalm petitions the Lord to revive Israel yet again, **“that your people may rejoice in you”** (Psalm 85:6). With John the Baptist in the Gospel, there's no explicit joy at least, the word isn't mentioned but what could possibly be a more fitting response than joy at hearing **“the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them”** (Luke 7:22).

It's easy to pretend joy this time of year. Just wear the right ugly sweater, drink a proper portion of eggnog, and decorate the house with ornaments, lights, and a Christmas tree, while Christmas songs play in the background. Go to parties, watch A Christmas Story, exchange presents. Everyone can do it. Everyone does. But for many, there's no real joy in it. And some are at their breaking point. Suicides are up this time of year.

It's hard to rejoice this time of year for many. Some have lost a husband or wife. For others, it's a son or daughter no longer willing or welcome to come home. Then there's the loneliness, barrenness, and hopelessness rampant in our broken world. Whether they've been taken from us or not yet given, it's difficult to ***“rejoice and exult with all your heart.”***

So, we fake it. It's just easier that way. We try to blend in so that no one asks. And the truth is that we really do want to rejoice! We want our hearts to sing. We want joy and gladness and the peace that surpasses all understanding.

But when we look at our life, our job, our family, even our own mind and heart we find little joy and little song. Where can we find true joy?

How can we, too, rejoice and sing and shout aloud? How can these Scriptures today be for us? The prophet Zephaniah locates this joy in the Lord's promises to his people: ***"I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. 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 in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes"*** (Zephaniah 3:18–20).

This is the Lord's promise. He will do it. He will gather us. He will take away our reproach.

He will deal with our enemies. He will save us and gather us and change our shame into praise and renown in all the earth. This gives us hope and sets us on the path toward joy.

But when will this be? When will he gather those of us who mourn for the festival? When will we no longer suffer reproach? When will our oppressors be put to shame and the lame and outcast be gathered together? When will he bring us in, gather us together, and restore our fortunes before our eyes?

That was John the Baptizer's question too. ***“Are you the one? Or shall we look for another?”*** John the Baptist leads us to Jesus. Is Jesus the one who will bring God's promises to me?

“In that hour [Jesus] healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered [John's disciples], ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to

them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me’” (Luke 7:21–23).

Jesus answered John’s question of who he is and when these things will be by fulfilling the promises before their very eyes. Jesus is the coming One. There is no other. Where he is, there the promises are fulfilled, and joy can be found! And as he came in the midst of his people, he came to comfort them in their fear and sorrow and shame and sickness. He came to undo all that saps the joy from us. He came to take away their sin and ours. Where Jesus is, there is our joy.

If you’re wondering where you might find joy especially this time of year then don’t look in the tinsel or wrapping paper, mulled wine or eggnog. Look to where Christ is. That’s the reason Zephaniah tells us to sing aloud and shout, rejoice and exult. ***“The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst”*** (Zephaniah 3:15).

Paul also locates all of his joy in the presence of Christ. “***Rejoice in the Lord always; again [he says], rejoice. . . . The Lord is at hand***” (vs 4–5).

And when Jesus sent the men to John, declaring all that they had seen and heard, joy sprang into John’s prison cell. It filled his and their worried hearts, and ours too! Wherever Christ and his work can be heard, where the promises of healing and restoration ring out, there you’ll find a peace that surpasses all understanding.

So, it goes for us, when we mourn or suffer, who feign joy because we can’t find any within: Rejoice and be glad, shout and sing aloud! The Lord is in your midst too! He’s here among us here in the church, here in the preaching, here in the bread and wine, here in and among the baptized.

Here he comes to take away the judgment against us, to cast out our fear, and to strengthen our weak hands and timid hearts.

He comes with the promises fulfilled, the forgiveness of sin, and he gives “***the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [and which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus***” (v 7). He’s here. “The King of Israel, the Lord, is in our midst; we shall never again fear evil” (Zephaniah 3:15).

So, rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I will say, rejoice! Not a feigned or momentary joy, but eternal joy here and now in Christ, who is with you and for you and today is in your midst.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.