**“God Rejoices Over You”**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 7:18-28

 Advent 3, Dec. 11/12, 2021

Again, from the prophet Zephaniah: “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 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; you shall never again fear evil. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; **He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing**.”

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

**Bridge**

Sometimes Christmas **feels like** a **command** **to a festive attitude**, and it can almost **seem like** Scripture supports this. And we who are left out of all the **feelings that we’re supposed to feel** are just left out. The Holy Season can **feel oppressive**; and that **is** oppressive yet **shouldn’t be in any way**. “Rejoice in the Lord **always**; again I will say, **rejoice**. **Sing aloud**, O daughter of Zion; **shout**, O Israel! **Rejoice and exult with all your heart**, O daughter of Jerusalem!” And “**Joy to** the world.”

For the **secular** world, it’s non-stop Christmas music on the radios sent out to “move the needle”. It’s Jimmy Steward and “It’s a wonderful life” on television necessary to get us there. It’s Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby (still their jobs to melt hardened hearts).

Meanwhile, the church must hear of **John imprisoned and doubting**. And the people at the time of Zephaniah were **mixed emotionally at best**.

**Text**

Christmas has to **creep up on you**. It’s never an **event** as much as a **process**, and the **movement most moves** when the process reminds you of **why**. One candle **becomes** two, **then** three, four, **then** all of them lit up and flickering. “**O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**” gives way to “the Lord **is come**.” For Old Testament “**hopers**”, it would all be “**someday**”. For John the Baptist, every day until the day of his death from earthly life would be dark as a dungeon yet lit by the information of what Jesus was **in the world** **doing** **and saying**.

He was the **last** of the **“wait-for-it”** **prophets** but, maybe, the **first** of the “**see-and-hear-about-it” believers**. Of **him** Jesus said, “I tell you, among those born of women none is **greater**. Yet the one who is **least in the kingdom of God is greater than he**”. John was that **movement of Advent to Christmas (from the promise God made to the promise He kept)** yet **emotions** baffled him: we’re never quite sure **how he’d fair with Christmas music**.

John was an **ascetic** all of his life. What that meant was that he **did without literally everything temporal**, not seeking money or notoriety, living in self-chosen poverty because he didn’t **need anything but the Lord’s call**. He was a desert dweller, unkept and didn’t care about the conventions of societal acceptance. For him, entertainment probably never existed (nor was missed) and **focus meant focus**, the **heavenly kingdom the goal** and not a wedding or kids or grandkids or even much in terms of shelter (barely clothes). John would **think foolish** what we call the holiday season. We might think **him foolish** if we didn’t appreciate his task and didn’t note Jesus’ obvious interest in him.

Yet John **sought** (and **was**) **joyful**. He **rejoiced**. “Are **You** the **One (Jesus) who is to come** or **shall we look for another?**” I picture him **deadpan in emotion**, butt **joy is not a fickle amount of emoting**. It’s an **inner peace**, and **for a REASON**. John knew the **REASON** better than **most**.

And it’s **THAT REASON** that brings to Advent’s third week a pink candle reminding of joy. Upon hope and preparation, **REASON** for joy is given, not just an encouragement for **emotion**, but **knowing** and **ENjoying** that affects much longer than a song or movie does. It is **WHY** a jail cell, even, can **house rejoicing** or a hospital bed or a too busy of a work-place or in a traffic jam or shopping center.

Yes, **rejoice** and **shout** and **sing aloud** and **exult** are **commands (all oppressive if stand-alone)**, but they **never stand-alone** **with** “**THE REASON for this season**”. As a matter of fact, there’s **this:** **the rejoicing is most all God over** **US** as “**THE REASON for the season**”) **…** **Him rejoicing over** **US**. “**Go and tell John what you have seen and heard:** the blind receive their sight (are gifted), the lame walk (gifted), lepers are cleansed (gifted), and the deaf hear (gifted by God), the dead are raised up (gifted and cherished by God), the poor have Good News preached to them (gifted). And **blessed is** **the one** (**any one**) **who is not offended by Me**.” ….

**In Zephaniah’s time**, people were mostly **secularly**-prosperous. They had their sicknesses and challenges, their family squabbles and neighbors not always agreeing with them on things. They had all the things that **can entertain**. **They** entertained and **were** entertained as much as we are minus the television. And they weren’t **sure about things either, wondered** (if they **cared to** and not just ignore what they **could** wonder about), and **did** **hope for more depth** **and content to life**, but that was (then too) just largely **wishful thinking**.

**But to** **them** Zephaniah and even Jeremiah talked about God’s coming. Messengers to people less-than-half listening, **these** announced a **REASON** for hope and preparation even when they didn’t see much of a need. **Had they had** a Christmas festival, they’d have shopped par to us. Yard decorations, then, would have been half Santa and Frosty and (some of the rest, maybe) nativity scenes. They, then, religiously exercised, yet only so far as it gave them the **traditions that they wanted** (not willing to tolerate more than what would **appeal to “wants”**). But they **craved and wished for joy and peace in their “heart of hearts”**. They wondered why **feelings** were so unreliable yet they **idolized the feelings** so (in the long run) disappointed or always flitting-around to find a bigger fix of **feelings**.

To this, God through Zephaniah clarified. “Sing aloud, shout, rejoice, and exult **with all your heart because** the Lord has taken away the judgements against you. God is in Your midst” (and He’s going to make that **ever the more noticeable**). “**HE WILL rejoice over you with gladness**; **HE WILL quiet you by His love**; **HE WILL EXULT OVER YOU with loud singing**.”

And, then, there’s **John**. What a great blessing God through Christ rejoiced-over-him by the compliment: “among those born of women none is greater than John”. He provided Him with all the proofs of both Word and deed. He **was / is God with us who would sacrifice Himself, the Lamb for slaughter and salvation**. **Jesus** “rejoiced over” John and all the world “with gladness”. **He** “quieted” John and the world who’d receive Him with the love of His sacrifice. **He’d** “exulted over” John and everyone who’s in Him so that we **could also** rejoice and shout, sing aloud, and exult.

## Application

We are mistaken when we take “Joy to the World” as the **world’s joy** and, not simply, the **receipt of** **GOD’S REJOICING OVER US**. **We** **CAN** follow, “rejoicing in the Lord always”, but that’s because **GOD** **DOES in and over us**. It’s **what He’s been doing** for six thousand years **promising salvation from our sins and delivering it in His own Son made flesh so as to die and rise and “be with us always, to the very end of the days” before He comes again**. It **was and still is** **God’s joy and pleasure to come** and be in our “midst” and “**save us**” and “**gather us**” and “**restore as**” as He said through Zephaniah. **His joy fulfilled** is the **REASON** we can share in it … by fact and reality **in Him**. In +Jesus’ name. Amen.