

The Joy of Home

JOY

December 12, 2021

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸ as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the 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.

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

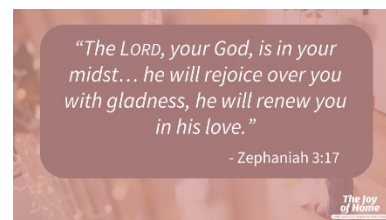
¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.



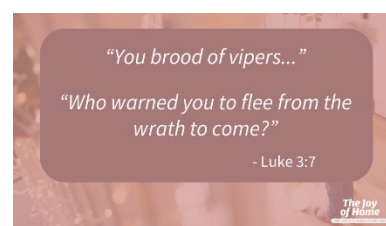
Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent, to the Sunday of joy. As we begin, I ask: where do you find joy? There are many places that I find joy. On Monday and Tuesday afternoons and on Wednesday evening I find joy in being around and working with our young people. And today is a special Sunday. Joy abounds today, in the presence of our young ones here today to offer a special experience after worship today. As I share these words, they are down the hall, practicing their lines and songs, getting ready to bring us joy this morning. I hope you too are looking forward to our Children's Christmas Program. Let us pray...

Turn with me to Zephaniah 3. Zephaniah was a minor prophet in the Old Testament, sent to speak God's word to the people of Judah. Scholars believe that Zephaniah spoke from about 620 to 600 BC. He spoke during the period when there was a divided kingdom – Judah to the south and Israel to the north. Zephaniah was sent to address the idolatry and selfishness and immorality of Judah. After two and a half chapters detailing their disobedience to God, we near today's passage. Verse eight leads into and gives us context for the words that we delve into now: *"Therefore wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness."* These words echo *"the days are coming"* and *"on that day"* from the past two weeks and again today. There is anticipation in these words of God. There is promise and there is hope. Verse twelve also connects into today's theme of joy and into preparing the way for Jesus, our Lord.

After God speaks of removing the *"proudly exultant ones"* in verse eleven, in verse twelve we read, *"For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly."* With this context we turn to our first passage for today. It is titled "A Song for Joy" in my Bible. Zephaniah begins by encouraging the people to *"rejoice and exult with all your heart."* Even though they are mired in their sin at the present, and even though judgment is surely coming, there will be a day. God is faithful. God will not abandon the people. Yes, they are walking far from the Lord as Zephaniah prophesies. But God will refine them; God will purify them. *"On that day..."* begins verse sixteen. This thought is followed in verse seventeen by these words: *"The LORD, your God, is in your midst... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love."* These words will be clung to for many years – just over 600 years, in fact.



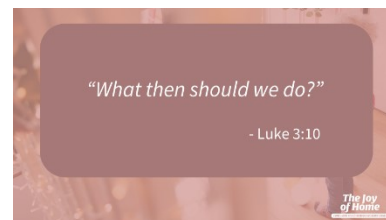
As we turn to our Gospel passage, to Luke 3, we hear a little bit of the Old Testament prophet in John. Last week, in the first six verses of this chapter, we heard John's call to prepare the way, to make straight paths, to smooth out the bumps, and to fill in the potholes for the coming king. As we begin in verse seven today, we see that a crowd has gathered. John the Baptist begins with what we might consider bad news. He begins with these words: *"You brood of vipers..."* So much for the God who rejoices over us and the God who renews us with love. John continues, asking, *"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* Whoa. Following in the common pattern established by the prophets in the ancient scriptures, John the Baptist speaks of impending judgment – the wrath to come. There are consequences for their sins.



And as it was with the prophets of old, John does not leave them sitting there with only bad news. John the Baptist paints a better picture. Foreshadowing much of Jesus' message, John informs the Jews that they must *"bear fruits worthy of repentance."* John is connecting a changed heart, a repentant heart, with a changed life. Simply saying they are from the family of Abraham will not cut it. Empty words will only lead to them being cut down and thrown into the fire, as we read about in verse nine. Claiming ancestry is no "Get Out of Jail, Free" card. For John, as it was with Zephaniah and as it will be with Jesus, how you live your life is what matters. Who you are – not so much. To our world today, John would warn that showing up for an hour or so on a Sunday morning is simply not enough.

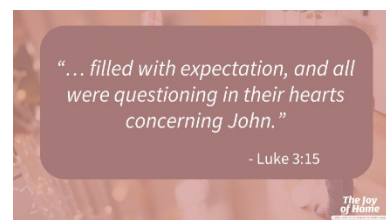


In response to these challenging words, in verse ten the crowd asks, *"What then should we do?"* In essence they are asking how they can be saved. To begin painting a future with hope, John describes what a faithful heart, what a heart turned toward God looks like when lived out in the world. It is about the exact opposite of the selfish, inwardly focused hearts that Zephaniah spoke to in his day. One can hear the people's desire to be made right, to be prepared, to be ready for the coming kingdom of God. The people ask, *"What then should we do?"*



In verses eleven through fourteen John addresses the actions of the average person, of a tax collector, and of a soldier. For the average person, for you and for me, if we have an extra coat or any extra food – we should share it with those in need. We are to generously and willingly give away our abundance. For a few in the crowd – those with power and influence – John warns against abusing their places of authority. If you have the power to take, John warns, do not to take more than you should. If you have the power to command others, he warns them about extorting money by threats or by false accusations. Those who have been oppressed and taken advantage of by such as these hear words of hope for their lives. Those who have oppressed and taken advantage of others hear words that call them a better way, to a more righteous faith. This is what Luke draws our attention to in verse fifteen.

Luke tells us that the people were *"filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John."*



This man speaks as a prophet, as one with authority and wisdom, as one who is clearly from God. They wondered, "Could he be the Messiah? Could he be the one we have waited for?" Sensing what was on their hearts and in their minds, John sets the record straight.

Beginning in verse sixteen we read, *"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will*



baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Filled with expectation and sensing a movement in their hearts, John the Baptist tells the people that the one who is coming is other-level powerful. So powerful, in fact, that John is not even worthy to untie his shoes. There is a clear difference between John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ.

This symbolic baptism of cleansing water that John offers will be replaced by a transforming baptism, by one of fire, by one that will lead to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all believers. The baptism that Jesus will offer is so much more powerful, so much more life changing. In this image we can connect to the idea of a refiner's fire. The refiner's fire resulted in a pure end product. This baptism of the Holy Spirit will lead to a life transformed. A transformed life will be revealed by generosity – sharing what we have with those in need – and by humility – thinking of others more than self. Being baptized by the Holy Spirit transforms us and leads us to bear fruit – that fruit worthy of repentance.

John returns to his prophetic Old Testament voice in the next verse. Here, in verse seventeen, John is clear about the impact or result of choosing Christ: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* Here John returns to the warning that he gave to the religious who came out into the wilderness to see him. Again, an empty faith or the living out of empty words will only lead to being cut down and thrown into the fire.

This idea of living fruitful lives is a focus of our Advent devotional's lesson for the upcoming week. Author John Birch notes that Jesus touches on this theme later in the gospel of Luke. In chapter six, verses 43-45, Jesus says, *"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil."* The judgment to come that John speaks of in today's text would be based upon the condition of the heart and of the life lived by each person.

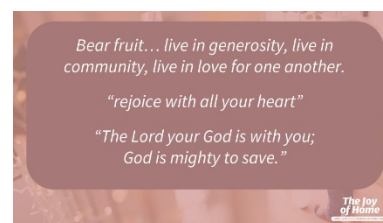
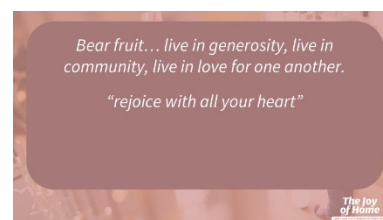
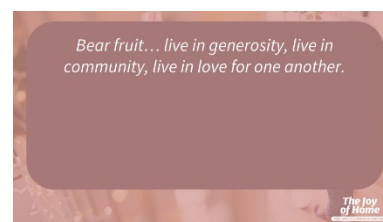
To the soldiers and to the tax collectors, John would say to live right, to live for justice, to learn contentment. Care about the people whom you have authority over. To the crowd, John would say to live in generosity, to live in community, to live as though you belong to one another because you do. This fruit is born through repentance, through being changed so that one can walk in a new direction. Walking with Christ we come to know life. With Christ dwelling in our hearts, we come to know joy. Knowing joy and knowing what living life to the full is like, we then want to share this life with others.

We want others to know the joy of being at home with Christ. We want others to experience the fullness of life. Living a life that shares this reality with others is bearing fruit worthy of repentance.



In closing we return to Zephaniah. In verse nineteen we read, *"And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise."* These words speak to the work of Jesus. Jesus healed the lame and the blind and the mute and the deaf. He gathered in the outcast and the marginalized and the broken. To all of these Jesus brought restoration and wholeness. These words also speak to last Sunday's challenge, to roll out the red carpet to make welcome those who fear or have had bad experiences with the church. They too need to know and experience the joy of being home in Christ.

John the Baptist calls us to bear fruit worthy of repentance – to live in generosity, to live in community, to live in love for one another. Zephaniah calls us to *"rejoice with all your heart."* The hope and joy that we find in Jesus Christ leads us to live rejoicing. The foundation of the Christian life comes from this promise found earlier in Zephaniah 3: *"The Lord your God is with you; God is mighty to save."* As we take these calls and this promise into the week ahead, may we be empowered by our mighty God, living with joy so that others may come to find joy as they are invited to come home to Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. The challenge this week is to live in generosity, to live in community, to live in love for one another. Which area will you focus on this week?
- 2) *Pray*. How is God moving you to share joy with someone you know that needs a little more Jesus? Allow the Spirit to guide you through prayer.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 1: 19-28. How is this interaction different than the one we read in Luke 3? Why do you think they wanted to know who John was?