

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

by Rev. Emily Chapman

December 13, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts:

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Phhilippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵The 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. ¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷The 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 ¹⁸as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹I 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. ²⁰At 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.

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

There was a couple who knew exactly what it meant to long for a child. After many years of trying to have one of their own, they began the process to adopt. Any of you who have gone through this process know that it is difficult and full of obstacles, but they refused to give up. In spite of all their experiences, hope had been a discipline for so long that they clung to it fiercely. After a couple of long years of waiting, they got a phone call that a baby was coming. A few more months of waiting and their little baby Arthur was in their arms. And they rejoiced. They rev-

eled in the excitement of this child, of all the struggles and joys of parenting. After a few more years, they thought it would be a good thing to get a sibling for Arthur. They began the whole agonizing process again. The paperwork, the waiting, the preparations, the hoping and waiting for that phone call.

The phone call finally came. They had been chosen, and in just a couple of short months, they would have a baby sister for Arthur. The preparations began. They got her room ready. They bought new clothes and pink decorations. They began talking to Arthur about his new little sister, teaching him to help care for her. They called their friends and their family and planned a huge party for the day she arrived. As the day began to draw near, family and friends were planning to come from all over for the celebration, another phone call came. The one any couple trying to adopt knows is possible and prays doesn't come. The birth mother had changed her mind. She was going to keep the baby. The couple of course was crushed, wondering how to tell all their friends and family, but more than anything, they wondered how they would tell Arthur that his sister was not coming after all, at least, not just yet.

So they sat Arthur down with them, now almost five years old, and just told him as honestly as they could that the baby wasn't coming any more. They braced for his response and his questions. This is what he asked: "Can we have the party anyway?" In the face of enormous pain and disappointment, a five-year-old boy knew more than anyone about the need to rejoice anyway.

I think imprisoned Paul and exiled Zephaniah would have agreed with sweet Arthur. Both wrote from places of deep despair, where the discipline of hope had grown difficult and exhausting. It is no place for rejoicing. Advent is no place for rejoicing. We are longing for something that has not yet come. It is a dark season, we sit with the lights dimmed as we come into church. We sing songs of pained yearning and expectation. But this week, we take a moment to rejoice.

Paul writes to the Philippians from his prison cell, far from any place he might call home, far from his brothers and sisters in those early Christian churches. He is in a place of persecution and punishment, of discomfort. He cannot practice his

faith in the ways he is accustomed to. It's not a place of joy. Yet, in the book of Philippians he exhorts the early church to rejoice 14 times, finishing it off with this "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say Rejoice!"

It doesn't matter where you are or how bleak things may look — rejoice!

Now, I'm guessing most of us haven't spent too much time reading Zephaniah. Take my word for it, Zephaniah could usually give the grim reaper a run for his money. The other chapters of the book are nothing but gloom and doom. Zephaniah and his people are in a very dark place. They are in a foreign land; an enemy has destroyed their communities and their places of worship. They are forced to live in a land where nothing is familiar, the language is strange, the customs are bizarre, the whole culture feels surreal. It has caused them to turn from their faith and look to other sources for their strength rather than to the Lord. Zephaniah rebukes them again and again and again. But the people are in exile, desperately seeking a source of joy and a sense of familiarity, of home. And finally in this last chapter, Zephaniah proclaims a time of joy, when the Lord will bring them home. We may not know too much about the kind of exile the Israelites knew. Our community is filled with immigrants and refugees for whom exile is no metaphor, but for many of us, we have not been driven from our homes, or made a journey through the desert to a strange land. But if we all take a minute to think about it, we have a similar longing for home. I'm not talking about the kind of home many of us may or may not choose to visit around the holidays, the place where you grew up, or where your family is now. That's not the sort of thing the Lord is getting at.

We don't all find joy in our earthly homes. Even if we do, it doesn't compare to the joy that comes from the realization that our real home is with God and God's home is with us. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote: "The human spirit is incapable of ridding itself of an abiding sense of homelessness." It's as though we never feel quite at home anywhere and are always seeking that sweet place of belonging. We understand just a little bit about exile — whether it's from our families, loved ones lost, or like Arthur's family, loved ones we never had, or exiled by our own fears and insecurities. But the promise from Zephaniah and Paul is that regardless of circumstances,

from whatever dark place of disappointment, imprisonment or exile we may come, there is JOY waiting for us in God's presence with us. Even when everything around us looks like reason for despair or at least frustration, rejoice anyway. When it seems there is nothing to celebrate, have the party anyway.

This is what we do every Advent. We face head-on the pain of seeing the world as it is because we can joyfully hope for that promised day when Jesus will return and peace and justice will rule all things. Even when another year goes by in a world of prisoners and exiles, we come to Christmas and we have the party anyway. We have the party because in spite of everything, it is great longing of God's heart to be with us. God wanted to be with so desperately that we are met far more than halfway in our desire to be at home with God. God came and made a home with us. This Advent week, in which we remember Christ our joy, we get a moment's respite in a season of waiting in the darkness for the light of the world. We have joy because in spite of everything, God wants each of us enough to come here, to be our Emmanuel, God with us.

The way Luke tells it, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, all went to their towns to be registered, and among them were Joseph and Mary, who was expecting a baby. In the city of David called Bethlehem, the baby was born and that day, as Zephaniah promised, the exile was over. The Lord God is with us and here to stay. Rejoice! Rejoice, Emmanuel has to thee oh Israel, Emmanuel, God with us has to come you oh Church. Rejoice, and again I say rejoice!