

Advent 3C: Zeph – Rejoice for the Lord is in your midst

1. There are several occasions in our lives where we rejoice and celebrate before the actual event occurs like baby showers and bridal showers.
 - a. The baby is not yet born, and the couple is not yet married. So, the real celebrations may be weeks or months in the future.
 - i. Still, we bring gifts in anticipation and have a party celebrating what we think we know is coming.
 - ii. In a sin-corrupted world tragedies occur such as miscarriages and engagements are broken.
 - iii. But we still celebrate, believing the joy will happen, and we celebrate as if the event has already occurred.
 - b. The prophet Zephaniah wrote six centuries before the birth of Christ, in the time of Jeremiah, just before Babylon would destroy Jerusalem and carry off the Israelites.
 - i. Our text today speaks of joy but if you read the book of Zephaniah, it is nothing like this text.
 - ii. The book opens with God’s judgment, **“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. I will sweep away man and beast...I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth.”** (Zeph 1:2)
 - iii. Israel had ignored the Law so Yahweh acts in judgment.
 - iv. The book is only three chapters long and the first two dwell on death and destruction of entire cities and nations
 - c. Yet in the face of that danger, Zephaniah writes, **“Sing aloud...Rejoice...Exult!”**
 - i. Why? Because even in the centuries before His first Advent, in the face of impending invasion, Zephaniah was certain that the Messiah was coming, **“The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.”** (Zeph 3:14–15).
 - ii. The hope of all the prophets was the fulfillment of the promise that God would be among His people.
 - iii. That hope gave them joy even as they faced persecution, suffering and exile.
 - d. We are called to celebrate and rejoice for the same reason – that God has fulfilled the promise to be with His people in Christ who has reunited heaven and earth through the cross.
 - i. So, during Advent we not only remember that Christ came in fulfillment of ancient prophecy, but we also look forward to the time when we will finally enjoy that face to face relationship we were created to have when He returns.
 - ii. But we are also able to rejoice now even in the face of our difficulties because like Zephaniah we know that God is in our midst.

2. Today is the third week of Advent, we light the Pink/White Candle, it is called Gaudete Sunday for the first word in the Latin Gradual meaning “Rejoice” from Paul’s letter to Philippians
 - a. Advent, like Lent, is actually a season of preparation, a penitential season as we remember that Jesus had to come into the world because of our sin.
 - i. But the third week of Advent gives us a bit of reprieve as we focus on the joy that came with the Advent of our Savior
 - ii. Zephaniah’s vision in our reading occurs at the end of his book and the joy he describes is not worldly joy which is more of an emotion; it’s Advent joy, the joy that comes as a spiritual gift.
 - iii. Spiritual gifts are gifts of substance not emotion, like the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes in Galatians 5 – love, peace, patience, gentleness...(Gal 5:22-23)
 - iv. That is the case with joy, too, not to be confused with happiness that is so often related to the absence of sorrow but joy even in its midst
 - b. Because whether you’re Christian or not, real life is full of sorrow, pain, and uncertainty
 - i. God knows that He knows that when we face grief and loss we are easily overwhelmed that is why He comes with the Promise of His presence and gracious activity in our midst.
 - ii. God doesn’t work through the removal of our problems
 - iii. If that were the case everybody would be in church – if all you had to do was look and see that everybody who goes to church was healthy, wealthy, and problem free who would remain atheist?
 - iv. Rather God works THROUGH our grief and sorrow, giving us something that the world cannot give – hope and peace despite our grief and struggle.
 - c. And we see that throughout Scripture.
 - i. In the midst of laments, psalmists sing for joy.
 - ii. Isaiah brings good tidings to people in exile.
 - iii. When the apostle Paul says in our Epistle “rejoice in the Lord always,” he is writing from prison.
 - iv. That joy comes from the realization that God is present with us in the midst of our sorrow,
 - d. So despite Zephaniah’s warning of impending disaster, he can speak of joy.
 - i. **“Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!”**
 - ii. Zephaniah can speak comfort because the Lord was present with his people even through His own judgment, **“The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty hero who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you with his love.”** (Zeph 3:17)
 - iii. It wasn’t by their avoidance of suffering that they are to rejoice but in the fact that God was working FOR Israel THROUGH it

3. And we find the same promise in the midst of our sorrow and suffering, as well, that God is with you
 - a. Remember that all of our sorrow, whether by our own actions or because we live in a fallen world, is from sin.
 - i. God didn't create the world this way we broke it by our sin and were it not for God's gracious activity we'd have nothing to look forward to except His wrath upon death
 - ii. Yet God in His mercy saw us in our misery and took it upon Himself to enter the world to redeem it from sin
 - b. God didn't just wave His hand and end our trouble but became One with His creation *suffering* for our salvation
 - i. As Isaiah prophesied of Jesus, "**He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...**" (Is 53:3)
 - ii. He became the sacrifice that takes away our sin and He is God's presence in the midst of our sorrow, "**He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; [His] chastisement brought us peace**" (Is 53:5)
 - iii. Jesus bore God's wrath that He might bring us into God's presence where He has made a place for all people through faith.
 - c. And He remains in our midst even now through His Word and in His sacraments to bring peace and a joy that the world cannot give
 - i. As I mentioned earlier, our Epistle from Philippians was written by Paul in prison yet you wouldn't know it to listen to him, "**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice...*The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***" (Php 4:4-7)
 - ii. Our joy is not conditioned on external circumstances but in the firm conviction that the Lord is at hand!
 - iii. So, on this third Sunday of Advent rejoice because Christ is in our midst!