

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Joy in the Dark

Luke 3

December 15, 2024

Advent III

The third Sunday of Advent is often called Joy Sunday. Joy can be as simple as taking delight in some small things that you've been over-looking. Joy can be a don't worry, be happy, lavender haze kind of day. Some people just seem to have a disposition to joy. Yet, life can have a way of puncturing even the loftiest of helium-high balloons. Then, can joy survive?

Life with God—that includes joy and its friends, faith, hope, and love-- always entails the inward and outward of all of life---what we say and what we do: head and heart and hands, understanding and action, interior illumination and outer righteousness. In the life of any community, these aspects are always interacting, and in any individual as well--coming together and breaking apart in myriad ways in life. (From Shae, 10)

What happens when they do not just break apart but are shattered? What happens when the cord of life is broken, that co-mingles intention and action; between who you believe you are and the person you realize you've become? What happens then? In the look in the mirror moment, when the familiar personage staring back at you has also become a stranger. What happens then? That is Zephaniah. The Old Testament book of Zephaniah is just three chapters, 2 pages, easy to over-look even if you know where it is (and I know you don't). Short little book, but it's a banger.

Zephaniah begins with two chapters of woe: widespread, midnight pall devastation of a people who are torn apart in their inner and outer lives. Two chapters of heartbreaking loss. And then, halfway through chapter 3, just like that, everything comes back together. That's our reading this morning. The clouds part. The light bursts in. The song is heard again even in the grief of all that has been: *"Sing aloud. Rejoice and exult with all your heart... I will remove the disaster from you. I will bring you home."*

It's that line, *I will bring you home*, that hits the heart the hardest. Here is assurance that you are in God's hands no matter where you are, even if you are far from home and far from where and who you want to be. Even in the midst of your exile, it's good news. It's the best news. Yet readers of Zephaniah, even those who know the context: around 601 BC sandwiched between post-Assyrian invasion and pre-Babylonian invasion and exile-- readers feel some whiplash when reading this prophet. Such hard news and then, so suddenly, such good news.

It's similar to what you may feel when hearing John the Baptist preach. He warns of wrath to come while then promising good news to come. *I baptize you with water, but the one who comes is greater; he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire.*

As lovely as are the promises of the end of Zephaniah, their true power derives from every word that has come before. One Old Testament scholar rightly counsels preachers, “It is tempting to jump right to the final oracle of the book and proclaim the good news that God’s presence brings joyful celebration. And indeed this is the message of the book, of the Advent season, and of Christian faith: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst ... he will renew you in his love” (Zephaniah 3:17); “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).

“Yet this message has its deepest significance when set in contrast to what has come before. **Despite** the people’s indifference, **despite** their hypocrisy, **despite** the cause for cosmic judgment, God’s entry into the world brings celebration, restoration, and new life.”

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Despite that.... God comes. Nevertheless... God comes.

And so let us draw in all of the prophet’s meaning into our proclamation today: God’s inbreaking into the world, and any hope we have for it, calls for our spiritual readiness but doesn’t wait for it. God comes despite our unworthiness and right deep into the valley of the shadow of death. All creation is fallen and fallen hard. God’s grace comes, *nevertheless*. Or what is the meaning of Bethlehem? Or of grace? Or advent or joy?

Fleming Rutledge was scheduled to preach an ordination service the morning after the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in December 2012. One town over from Newtown, Connecticut. How do you do that? It’s only because she has her finger on the pulse of Advent as fully as anyone I know that she could stand in the pulpit the very next morning and preach. Most of us would be struck hopelessly dumb, but she has the gospel.

She began her sermon: “In the church, it’s the season of Advent. It’s superficially understood as a time to get ready for Christmas, but in truth, it’s the season for contemplating the judgment of God. Advent is the season, when properly understood, does not flinch from the darkness that stalks us all in this world. Advent begins in the dark and moves toward the light, but the season should not move us too quickly or too glibly, lest we fail to acknowledge the depth of the darkness... Advent bids us take a fearless inventory of the darkness: the darkness without and the darkness within.” (315)

There are times when we are made acutely aware of the darkness around us and within us. Here you are, and there it is; and it’s the darkest night of the year. For you it may seem the darkest, longest night that ever was in all creation.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-zephaniah-314-20-6>

There will never be easy answers to Sandy Hook or Uvalde or any of the manifestations of the evil that humans inflict on one another and just the bad things--the tragedies that befall people without any explanation at all. There are no easy answers to the heartbreaks that have no answers at all and for which there aren't even big enough questions but Why? And God, where were you? And: What do we do now in the mystery and dust and ashes of our lives?

Is my friend Angela Gorrell right when she says: "Joy doesn't obliterate grief... Instead, joy has a mysterious capacity to be felt alongside sorrow and even—sometimes most especially—in the midst of suffering." Angela, one would think, should know: she was hired by Yale University to study joy theologically. But that's not how she knew. Soon after she arrived at her new post, a close family member died by suicide; within a month, her father died by a fatal opioid addiction, and her 22-year-old cousin had a sudden cardiac arrest and died, too. The professor of joy was in a tailspin of grief. She wondered if she could hold it together—this shattered existence of inward and outward life. Then she met women at a maximum-security prison, women who suffered mightily in their incarceration and way before it and for reasons way beyond any prison bars. Yet they still showed a tremendous capacity for joy. She began to learn there, in her own heartbreak, that joy can be felt in the midst of suffering among those who "walk together through the shadows to find it." It's those who hear God's promise in Zephaniah: I will bring you home.

Christina Rossetti, the 19th-century poet, gave voice to this faith and this awareness to these life experiences in her poem "A Christmas Carol" we know best as the hymn, *In the Bleak Midwinter*:

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter long ago.*

In the 2nd stanza of the poem, the bleak midwinter is revealed as the stable for the Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ. She writes:

*In the bleak mid-winter, a stable-place sufficed
Lord God almighty, Jesus Christ.*

The poem has come under some scrutiny and criticism by some for its unrealistic depiction of the geographical setting of Judea which is typically warm and arid. The critics complain, "Snow is rare there. Winter is rarely bleak there. What is she talking about?"

I just wonder, how could they miss the point? How could those critics miss the poetic imagery of mid-winter so completely? Yet, I admit, I used to, as well. I wasn't worked up about the weather report for the night of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but I also sure didn't see why mid-winter needed to be invoked in a Christmas carol. The whole thing sounded dreary. Can't we just have a wonderful Christmas time?

Years ago, an older friend and I were together--outside on a very cold winter, mid-Atlantic day. We were outside, which was crummy. It was definitely midwinter, which for a god-fearing Texan, is by definition bleak. Bleak is any day that's not sunshine and seventy, like God intended, from February-November and often in December. My friend said, out of the blue as I recall, "I love this weather: the cold, the clouds, the gray skies. I love it. It's where I relate best to God."

"Really?" I asked out loud—in one of those times when you're surprised that the thing you thought came out loud. This made no sense to me. I guess back then, for a while, I lived in a world in which winter, both in weather and as spirituality, was just to be endured until it was over and had little to do with my theology. It was kind of a downer really. God is good. Christ is our savior. Thanks be to God. In communion terms, I received the bread but didn't notice that before I receive it, it must be broken. Perhaps I wasn't yet experiencing or walking closely with those for whom the advent journey isn't just marked off on a calendar and midwinter not just a weather forecast. "Really?" I asked, "I'm more of a summer-time guy myself. And you know, it probably wasn't cold and snowing in Bethlehem."

He looked at me like I was a rube. "*In the Bleak Midwinter* is my favorite Christmas carol," he said. "Really?" I said. "Does Wham even sing it?" (They did not.) "Why is it your favorite?"

He thought a moment and said, "It just touches something deep in me. It touches something deep in all the world. Something true."

I came to understand later some of the pain he was living with while he was talking that day, and the fires of life in which his faith was forged. He said "For me, the hope of Christ comes in my darkness and the brokenness of the world. The gospel is this, or it is nothing."

I've come to understand: The hope of Christ comes in the darkest of nights, the longest of griefs, the loneliest of exiles. The deepest shades of shame. Christ comes to the most shattered of hearts, the sorrow of loss, into the endured injustices of life. The gospel comes not a tidy answer but as God's own self coming into the most harrowing of tragedy. It is this, or it is nothing at all.

For the prophets, for John in the wilderness, in mid-winter's Advent, in the bread broken, in the hands that are pierced, in all the gospel of Jesus Christ from Bethlehem to Golgotha, for countless believers who bear witness to the light of the world... it is this and, by God, it is everything. Amen.