

"Rejoice in the Lord Who Rejoices in You"
Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 16, 2018

3rd Sunday of Advent

When explaining the meaning of the pink candle in the Advent wreath and the Sunday of joy in the Advent season, I'm often met with blank stares from people, even members. After thinking about this for a while, I've concluded there are 2 reasons for this confusion. First of all, isn't all of this pre-Christmas season supposed to be happy? Haven't we been "Merry Christmas"ed and "ho ho ho"ed to death for the past month? Why shouldn't all of our Advent worship be happy? Secondly, isn't all of our spiritual life supposed to be joyful? Are we not entitled to that as the people of God? Not only do people misunderstand the reason for the one week of happiness in the four-week Advent cycle, but they don't understand why we are such killjoys when it comes to having three weeks of somberness before Christmas in the first place. (And don't even begin to start the discussion on the six weeks of Lent.)

This is the coming of the Lord which we are celebrating. This is about a baby, a manger, shepherds, angels, wise men, and so many other happy things. This is why people want to rush ahead to the Christmas hymns and leave the Advent hymns behind. The Christmas hymns are happy. Many of the Advent hymns are somber with negative themes written in minor keys. This means that both the message and the melody seem sad. Why shouldn't it all be happy?

My answer would be (in the form of a question), "What in the world, literally, would give you the idea that we should expect anything to be happy? Sadness is not the exception in our lives, but it often is the norm. Somberness and sorrow should not surprise us. We should expect these things. Why?"

The short answer, of course, is sin. Just as "Jesus" is always the right answer about anything good, "sin" is always the right answer for anything bad. Sin is the reason for all our sadness. God created everything good. In fact, when he finished creating, He declared everything to be "very good". Adam and Eve were happy – perfectly happy. But when sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, creation, which had been good, became bad. Sin corrupted creation. Sin corrupted people. Sin has corrupted you and me. Suffering and sadness have become the norm in our lives and in the world.

Sin is the reason for the tragedies of our modern world: mass killings, poverty, natural disasters, diseases, aging, and death. Sin is the reason for the problems in our interpersonal relationships. Sin can damage or destroy our friendships, marriages, families, working relationships, and so on. This results in the loss of friends, divorces, broken families, conflict in our world workplace, and others. All these things result in much sadness and grief.

But people will say, we're talking about church, not the world. Yes, there is much sadness and grief in the world, but shouldn't things always be happy in church? Shouldn't all the messages be positive in nature? Shouldn't all the hymns be upbeat and written in major keys?

If we think that, then we must remember the worst effect that sin has on us. Sin separates us from our God. As long as we are out of touch with the will of God or separated from God by our sin, we will not be truly joyful ever. Sin separates us from joy and happiness by separating us from God who is the source of joy and happiness. That doesn't sound very happy.

Sin also has eternal consequences. Sin subjects us to God's anger and punishment, both here in life and, after death, in eternity. God will indeed come to judge the world,

eradicate sin and condemning those who have committed it to an eternity in hell. That doesn't sound very happy at all. This has a tendency to create fear and dread instead.

In an attempt to hang on to the hope for happiness, people will try a couple of things. First, they might try to deny sin or redefine it. In this way, you can never be guilty of sin because you have redefined it to fit your behavior. You are never having to worry or fear hell and damnation for the same reason. You can always be happy because you are always on God's side that way.

Second, if that doesn't work and you are still feeling guilty or fearing condemnation, you can try to redefine God. People say that God is only a God of love. They will say God loves you just the way you are. Some will even go to the extreme (even good church members) and say, "I can't believe that God would ever send anyone to hell. We are God's people. He loves us. He would never judge, condemn or punish us." Therefore, you can always be happy.

This is exactly the problem God's people in the Old Testament had in our text for today. They were convinced, like we are today, that they were entitled to be happy and that God would never punish or abandon them, even though they were worshiping idols along with the true God and living sinful lives. "Zephaniah says simply that God will bring misfortune and affliction upon the people so that they may be moved to repentance. For none of the prophets was ever even once able to persuade the people that God was angry with them. They rely continually on the claim that they were, and were called, God's people, and whoever preached that God was angry with them had to be a false prophet and had to die, for they would not believe that God would leave his people." (Lutheran Study Bible, page 1511)

The people of Judah felt invincible and completely safe from God's anger, wrath, and punishment. They lived in moral and idolatrous lives while becoming apathetic and angry toward true preaching. As long as they were the "people of God", occupied the Promised Land, and had the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they were safe – or they thought so. They would always be happy – or they thought so.

The message of the first 3 chapters of Zephaniah's book is one of scathing condemnation and the threat of punishment at the coming of the Lord. And it wasn't only against the enemies of the true God, but for Judah, as well. Yet the so-called "people of God" ignored it because it was so negative and continued living the way they always had lived. Much to their shock and sorrow, the Lord kept his promise to His people. He abandoned his people and allowed the armies of Babylon to overrun the country and the city – burning the walls of Jerusalem, burning the walls of the Temple, and exiling the people to Babylon.

I believe it is the same for us today. We feel invincible from God's anger, wrath, punishment and so we sin without hesitation and quite intentionally while living lives devoted to the idols of this age: pleasure, wealth, technology, and so on. We see the apathy and indifference of people regarding the will of God, even among Christians. We may pay lip service to the will of God when it is convenient and necessary but it seems we feel no need to improve or obey. Will we experience the same fate as Judah and Israel before her – the people of God ignoring the will of God and so judged by God and punished by God – here or even in eternity?

You can see now why there was sufficient cause for sadness on the part of the people of Judah and sufficient cause for sadness on our part. God is serious about sin. He cannot tolerate sin in his presence or let it go unpunished. It doesn't matter who you are and with which group you claim affiliation, God judges all people the same. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All have earned his wrath and anger. All deserve His punishment and abandonment.

Yet there is still reason for joy and happiness. All the prophets spoke of a great and terrible “day of the Lord.” They understood this to be a time of great sorrow and fear, judgment and condemnation for the whole world, even the people of God, when the Lord came to earth.

This is why John the Baptist was confused in our Gospel reading for today. He had preached that judgment and punishment were coming when the Messiah arrived. However, when Jesus showed up, he wasn't seeing any of that. So, he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” In other words, he was asking, “Where is all the fire and brimstone? When are you going to start to do with the Messiah is supposed to do?”

Jesus did not answer in words but actions. Jesus told John's disciples to tell John what they were seeing: Jesus was giving sight to the blind, restoring the lame, cleansing the lepers, giving hearing to the deaf, raising the dead to life, and preaching good news to the poor. In other words he was doing what the Messiah should be doing – at that time. There was no fire and brimstone – yet.

Their problem and our problem is that we fail to understand “the day of the Lord” adequately. John and the people of his time thought the coming of the Lord meant only judgment and punishment. We think that the coming of the Lord means, especially at this time, only the time for God to be born as a baby in a stable with a manger as his first bed, angels singing, and wise men presenting gifts. Who is right?

The answer is: both are right. Jesus was born into this world on Christmas because of God's fervent love and tenderhearted mercy toward us and all people. That is true. However, His coming two thousand years ago is still connected with God's anger and wrath against the sin of all people, including the people of God. Jesus did not come simply to be just another preacher, miracle worker, or all-around nice guy. Jesus came to confront God's wrath and anger against all sin by suffering and dying on the cross. This is more, much more, than simply a painful death. It was the sacrifice for all sin whereby Jesus endured the punishment for our sin so that God would not have to punish us. It was the abandonment of God the Father of his son, Jesus, so that God would never have to abandon us. By Jesus' death on the cross, God's wrath because of sin was satisfied and his punishment for sin was complete.

Here is the great joy for the people of God for all times. The idea that joy cannot exist when there is sadness and suffering is a myth. Joy does not exist apart from suffering, but joy exists despite suffering and in the midst of suffering. After God punishes, He shows mercy and restores. That is why the prophet can say, after the judgment and after the punishment in our text, “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exalt 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.”

True to his word, the Lord restored his people by forgiving their sin, returning them to the Holy Land, and reestablishing His Temple. There was reason for rejoicing for God was once again, in the midst of his people, serving them with His gifts, and protecting them so they never had the fear evil again.

The same is true for us. Even though sin has corrupted creation, including us, so that we experience sadness as a way of life and even though our personal sin has separated us from God and caused us much suffering, there is still reason for joy to exist despite the suffering and in the midst of suffering. When the Lord brings us to true repentance through

His Word, gives us a new life in Holy Baptism, forgives our sin, and restores us to Himself, there is joy.

Therefore, now in spite of the suffering and sadness and even in the midst of suffering and sadness, it is time to sing aloud and rejoice. The Lord has taken away the judgments against you and me by placing them on His son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. He has cleared away our enemies – sin, death, and the devil. The King of Israel – our Lord Jesus Christ – is in our midst so that we never fear evil again. His voice comes to us through the mouth of a pastor who speaks God’s absolution for our sins of the past and proclaims His promises for the future joy. We live now in the joy of being the family of God as His adopted children in Holy Baptism with our Lord Jesus as our older Brother. Where His family is, He is also. Our Lord is in the midst of us with His very body and blood on our altars to feed and nourish us with the forgiveness of sin and the life of faith.

This is great joy and not mere happiness. To paraphrase the collect for peace, it is a joy that the world cannot give. It is a joy that lasts and which circumstances cannot change. And it will only get better on the day of the Lord when he comes in judgment to declare us “not guilty” and bring us to be with Himself in heaven.

But there’s more. Not only is there joy for us, but, the text says, the Lord rejoices as well. It says, “he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love.” The Lord truly loves you and me and is happy to have you as His people, despite our sin. He judges and condemns people only as His “alien work” as the theologians say. It is a foreign work for the Lord to do. His true nature is to love and forgive. He delights and rejoices when he is able to do that. He wants us to live as His people now and for all eternity. It is never His desire to cast away anyone.

Living in the Lord’s joy brings us joy as well, despite all the sadness around us. We keep the dark candles, the hymns in the minor keys, and other symbols of sadness to remind us of what we deserved for our sin during Advent. Yet the Lord’s joy brings joy to His repentant and faithful people for what He has done in the past, what He is doing for us now, and what He has in store for us in the future.

As Zephaniah says in our text, “Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time, I will bring you in, at that time when I gather you together; For I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes.”

The Lord has gathered us together into his family. He has dealt with all our oppressors. He has given us peace for the present, hope for the future, and joy for all eternity. Because of that, we will rejoice in the Lord now and will rejoice with the Lord forever. Amen