

Joy to the World!
Zephaniah 3: 14-20
December 16, 2018 (Advent 3)
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Just about every Christmas movie has a happy ending.

Scrooge dances with joy and gives Tiny-Tim money to buy a prized Christmas goose and the Cratchit family sits down to a joyful feast.

George Bailey's guardian angel gets his wings as the bell on the tree rings.

Buddy the Elf builds a beautiful life seamlessly blending human and elf culture.

Hans Gruber is defeated.

The grinch brings back the presents, and the food for their feast, and he, yes he himself the grinch, carves the roast beast.

It seems to be the defining trait for a good Christmas movie. All is well at the end. Perhaps it starts gently snowing as the camera pans up and the credits roll.

What could be better.

But of course, it takes something to get those endings to be meaningful. We have to watch the whole movie first.

Without the conflict, the tension, the danger, the endings are meaningless. If we don't see where scrooge starts, we will have no appreciation for where he ends up. Where the story begins is what makes the end so precious.

Today's scripture reading is an ending. It is the third and final chapter of the short prophetic work of Zephaniah.

It is relentlessly upbeat and optimistic. Talking of the joy of God. Of life without worry or fear. A festival day. Fortunes restored.

It's a good ending.

The rest of the book.

Not so much.

We didn't read it this morning, but let me give you some highlights.

It starts off with a bang, the very first line is this: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth" There are cries and crashes. Toppling walls. Crumbling buildings. Plunder and waste. Ruin and devastation.

It's a lot.

And this prophet is not describing some imagined far off judgement day. He is describing what will really happen when the armies of the Assyrians pour into the northern kingdoms of Israel and turn their cities to ash and dust.

The prophet imagines that God has withdrawn, and abandoned the people in anger.

I just don't want you to think that all this joy talk that is coming is the happy-go-lucky kind of joy. It is the hard won joy of finding hope and home on the other side of devastation.

The prophet tells of a time when God will return, and with God, the people will be restored. Their every tear wiped away, their homes restored, their hope renewed.

God says, rejoice, rejoice, because the I am in your midst. Do not be afraid.

Did you know there is a special flag that flies over any royal residence when the Queen of England is in the building. The flag is taken down when she leaves and replaced with the regular flag of the United Kingdom. But whichever residence she is in, the flag flies overhead.

I think that for the people in the first half of our story, it seemed like the flag had been taken down.

Like their God was simply not there. Not home with them.

I wonder if you have ever felt like that? I wonder if you might feel like that this morning?

Like God is far away, like God has left you behind, or like God is angry at you.

The story of salvation and the journey to joy always begins in a place like that.

Time and time again all through scripture God chooses to work miracles through the most broken people, God raises up leaders from among the most dysfunctional families, God showers praise on the poor and the lowly.

This is what the joy of Christmas is about. It isn't the Christmas spirit. It isn't the smile we feel pressured to force onto our face at party after party, it isn't the way we try to make our lives look a little more beautiful than the feel on our Christmas cards.

It is the joy that we know when Christ's flag is raised high over our lives. When we take into our hearts the true power of the good news that God has come into our midst, to stay.

It is the happy ending to the story of salvation. That the worst thing is not the last thing. That God has not left us behind, God has not abandoned us, in fact God loves us so deeply that God took on the vulnerability of infancy and the frailty of a human body in order to be that much closer to us.

To come, truly come, into our midst.

The gift of joy is not the icing on the cake of a perfect life. It is the very thing that we most need in the depth of despair, in the drear of the mundane, in hopelessness, in emptiness, in fear.

I remember several years ago watching the funeral for the nine church goers shot in Charleston. I remember it so clearly because it was my very last day as the pastor at my previous church, and the with my car loaded up with everything from my office, the very last thing I did was stop by for a final visit with one older member who I had visited often over those years.

She was watching the funeral. And so I watched it with her.

I remember so vividly being struck by the presence of joy in what I expected to be a somber rite.

In the music, and the preaching. It truly was a celebration of God's faithfulness. And a resolute stand against the power of hate to shatter joyous love.

Of course, I should not have been surprised. It is one of the many great gifts of African-American Christian communities. The ability to experience and express God's joy, even in the midst of the hardest and most painful parts of life. Even in the face of racism, and violence.

I have often wondered since that day why it is so hard for me. No matter how deep my faith, I am still not sure that it is strong enough to make me joyful at a funeral. And I still stumble through my praises of God on occasion, especially when the world bears its cruelty so plainly.

I wonder if perhaps that kind of deep joy just requires experiencing an extent of suffering that I simply have not.

When Mary, pregnant with Jesus visits her cousin Elizabeth, Mary sings a hymn of hope and praise that we know know as the magnificat.

Several years ago a well known children's book author from New Zealand named Joy Cowley wrote a beautiful interpretation of this text that I think speaks so clearly of the simple joy of knowing God's presence.

Allow me to share it with you:

My soul sings in gratitude.
I'm dancing in the mystery of God.
The light of the Holy One is within me
and I am blessed, so truly blessed.

This goes deeper than human thinking.
I am filled with awe
at Love whose only condition
is to be received.

The gift is not for the proud,
for they have no room for it.
The strong and self-sufficient ones
don't have this awareness.

But those who know their emptiness
can rejoice in Love's fullness.
It's the Love that we are made for,
the reason for our being.
It fills our inmost heart
and brings to birth in us, the Holy One.

So when we proclaim, Joy to the World, it is not because all is well. It is because with God in our midst, with Christ having been born once more in our hearts, we can rejoice.

It is because we have known the beauty and fullness of God's love. A love whose only condition is to be received.

It is because we know the hard beginning of our stories, that we can encounter God transforming our stories, bringing them to joyful endings.

Because we who know our emptiness can rejoice in love's fullness.

