

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Hurricane Lamps
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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Joy is uncommon. Do you know what I mean? The feeling of pure unrestrained bliss is something people tend to be suspicious of. Would you agree? In our culture, when there is so much around us that wants to rob us of the feeling, meeting a person who is genuinely, and without hesitation, joyful, you're almost tempted to ask yourself: "What's wrong with that person?"

Let me tell you what I mean. My wife will attest, there are a few things in the world that just make me objectively joyful: traveling to Minnesota is one, squeezing my kids' little bottoms--that's another, and watching really good movies, especially, though not limited to, the superhero and LOTR genre (I bet you didn't know that was a genre...it is). But the other day, Amy came home and I was in such a good mood, there was no mistaking it. And the first words out of her mouth, not kidding: "You had candy didn't you?" When I eat candy, there is a physiological transformation that takes place inside of me, I imagine the kind of effect a person experiences when they are "on something." Sugar literally makes me happy, anyone else?

Sometimes in our day when we see someone who is just categorically joyful, we are tempted to think to ourselves, "What is that person on?" If they're like me, then it's just sugar. If we're tempted to think that real joy is hard to come by, so much so that one has to find it through pharmaceutical substitutes and such, then the question is, why? Why is it that joy uncommon? I think there is a really simple answer for us: sometimes life is difficult.

I don't think any one of us would disagree with this statement. We all know that there are times when life is just hard. It feels like we're pushing a boulder up a steep slope, like the myth of Sisyphus, only to have it roll back on us, crushing as it goes. Or maybe we feel like we're carrying a heavy weight from which we just can't free ourselves. Life is hard, and the people around us, and even ourselves, we go through times that are hard, and it's hard to be joyful, would you agree? But that doesn't mean joy can't be present at the same time. Hmm?

I would like to suggest that doesn't mean that joy can't also be present at the same time. Joy is, in fact, an experience that isn't always dictated by the circumstances of our lives. It can be, but at its core, it is something altogether different. Joy has the ability to transcend our circumstances. In fact, I would argue that it's joy that keeps us moving forward in the middle of hard times.

This month, we've been going through a series of messages looking at themes surrounding a line from a very famous Christmas Carol, *O Holy Night*. The lyric says this: "the thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." Today we're looking at the idea that what God does in Advent and at Christmas reminds us that we can actually be joyful in the midst of really hard stuff. For Mary and Joseph, it was the thrilling news that was shared with them by the Angels that sent them to Bethlehem. Don't you think along the way Mary asked herself: "I wonder if people are going to do the math from our wedding and this baby's birth; I wonder if my cousin Elizabeth will accept

me in my state? I wonder how this little guy is going to survive the evil King Herod's edict?" But for Joy, these two kids might have been tempted to give up. Do you know what that's like?

In the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, he says to the people, "*Don't be sad, don't mourn or weep, for the Joy of the Lord is your strength.*" Joy transcends circumstances and gives strength where none other is found.

I don't know if you heard it last week or not, but on NPR, David Green interviewed a singer-songwriter who I was not familiar with, a guy by the name of Jeffrey Foucault from Wisconsin—obviously when I heard this, my ears perked up. Towards the end of the interview, Green asked him to play a song, and the song he chose is one he calls "Hurricane Lamp." And while he was tuning his guitar getting ready to sing it, Foucault told him how he wrote it. A friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer; it's really a song about joy in a dark place.

The lyrics go like this: "You've got a heart like a hurricane lamp, and I see you shine anywhere I am." I thought to myself, what a beautiful picture of what joy is. Indestructible joy, joy that can't be snuffed out by a shifting wind. And so the question is: do you have a flame of joy that's indestructible, that's shielded, that's protected when windy times come? Does your joy come from something that can't be taken away from you?

This morning's passage that was read to us from the Prophet Zephaniah is one of pure joy. But if you were dipping into this book for the very first time and read no more than these seven verses, you would never guess that the verses and chapters leading up to this are just plain gloomy. Verses 14-20 are a bit misleading, because the rest of the book is utterly miserable, sad, grim, devoid of hope. Telling the people of Judah of the impending judgment God's about to send down on them. In a way, the prophet Zephaniah makes the others we've read sound like Stuart Smalley (do you remember Stuart Smalley? I'm good enough, smart enough, and doggonit people like me). Not Zephaniah, he's really miserable, he's more like (GRUMPY CAT MEME).

To this point, Zephaniah has offered 8 oracles, 8 prophetic messages to the people of Judah, that have been nothing but doom and gloom. But then in the 9th oracle, he offers a word of promise and pure joy that has nothing to do with your life, it doesn't depend on your circumstances going well, but is rooted deeper. Zephaniah offers a call to joy that is rooted in God himself.

If you will see this and if you will take it deep into your heart as a message that is true about God, then I believe your life can begin to take root in joy.

Let's walk through a few of these verses line by line and look at them closely. Beginning at verse 14:

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem.*

One verse, for verbs commanding joy. I don't know about you, but there is nothing that elevates me out of a grouchy mood than when someone comes along—especially if that person doesn't know me—and says: "Hey, you're grouchy, you should just be happy." Does that work for any of you?

When Zephaniah wrote these words, the people of Israel were living in very difficult circumstances. This was the lowest of the low for God's people. Their rulers were crooked, their city was in ruins, there was no justice, no community, no worship, no hope. But they also knew that the reason they were in such a bad spot, and this is not so different from us, was that they had walked away from God.

Zephaniah says to them, *I know things are bad right now, but I know that deep down there, quietly hidden away in your heart, there is a melody. It's low and quiet now, but let it out. Shout! There is hope, and cheer and a song to sing, shout, sing out, let it out, be courageous. Let everything you have, your feelings, your emotions, you will, your body, bend it all toward God. Stand up, spin around, raise your hands and be glad.*

Why? Why does the prophet say this? Why should I be joyful?

Let's continue to read continuing with verse 15.

The 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. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The 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 as on a day of festival.

Do you hear the good news in this passage? Do you see it? Judah is about to be swept away in judgment, and even still, even before it happens, God is saying to them, *This may happen now, but I will restore you, you are mine and I will redeem your lives. One day, you will breathe the fresh air of freedom from your home.*

You, me, we are guilty, but God has decided to take away his judgments from us. If I take a moment, I can close my eyes and remember the regrets from my past; you can, too. Not the regrets that have been inflicted upon us, but those times where we dealt an ill placed word; when you rejoiced over another person's misfortune; watched on as someone was dealt a cruel hand and you didn't do anything to change it; where we allowed our desire for ease to allow someone else's life to be more difficult. I know and we know that we have done all of these things, and we are deservedly guilty.

And what the prophet says here is that this God, the one whom he speaks of here, is the one who takes away the judgments from us. The Old Testament is filled with examples of how God chooses not to hold our sins against us, but chooses instead to shower us with mercy and goodness, forgiving our sins as far as the east is from the west.

Psalms 103 says: **God does not deal with us according to our transgressions, nor does he repay us for our iniquity.**

And if you're thinking to yourself, *Wow, that seems like God is letting all those bad people off too easy*, well then maybe you haven't come to grips with the depth of your own sin and how

great a thing it is that God forgives you. God's love is not a zero sum game. Our tendency is to be gracious to ourselves, but unrelenting to another. What the Prophet wants us to see is that we are all infinitely culpable for our actions, and God, very easily and justifiably, could have cast us off, every one. But what the Prophet Zephaniah says here is that is precisely what God does not do.

I know every one of you probably has Zephaniah memorized. After all, it's one of those books we read all the time. But when you have a chance, maybe after lunch today, read the first two and a half chapters of this book. Judah is deserving of nothing but God's wrath, but the glorious conclusion of this book should send us away leaping with inexplicable joy. Because God does for his people precisely the opposite of what their actions require—that, my friends, is the definition of grace.

The word *grace* in Greek is the word *charis*, or *chara*, and do you want to know what the rough, wooden definition of that word is? SURPRISE JOY. Surprise. Joy. Joy is what God wants our lives to be filled with, even when things are hard and gloomy, because the God who loves you gave you the surprise gift of joy, grace.

The wonder this Advent is not that we have joy; the wonder is that there aren't more people with this kind of unrestrained joy. Joy is why I decided to wear my salmon colored pants today. I know you're all looking at them and thinking to yourself, *Man, where can I get me some of those pink pants?* Maybe your materialism is sort of flaring up, thinking to yourself, *If only I had a pair of those Nantuckett Reds, then my life would be joyful.* But remember, joy comes not from the pants, but the pants are the outpouring of joy that I am infinitely not deserving of God's love, nor am I deserving of wearing pink pants, but because God is the God of pure joy, there they are!

The prophet Micah says it this way: "Who is like God? God does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18-19).

The apostle Paul says in Colossians, where is your guilt? It is nailed to the cross with him, there went the legal record of your iniquities. God took him who knew no sin and made him sin, so that we would become his righteousness.

And why we anticipate with joy, why we sing songs of yearning and longing like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (Come God with us) and "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" is that we too are tempted like that friend who was diagnosed with cancer and whose lamp was threatened to be blown out, we continue to put up that bulwark, guarding our lamp from the hurricanes, and in that waiting, we remind each other that Jesus is coming, and has come.

In these final days before Christmas, we can remember that teenage couple, given news that was beyond comprehension, full of joy, but also how they had to face the storms of what was ahead. The Joy of Emmanuel was their hurricane lamp. Even today, 2000 years later, we can see it shine wherever we are. So in the words of Jeffrey Foucault, keep your light inside. Keep your light inside us, Lord, we pray, when given to resignation and despair, keep your light of joy guarded and kindled in our lives. Keep your light of mercy and forgiveness of our sins, visible in our

lives. Keep your light of joy trimmed and leading us forward. Come, our Long expected Jesus, we need you today to kindle our faith, renew our hope, and fuel our joy. Come, Lord Jesus, come, we pray, amen.