

## **Dare to Imagine Joy**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**

**Advent 2021-Week 3**

Good Morning Church Family, it's good to be together this morning. We send our love to those of who are joining us online for this advent season.

Growing up, one of my favorite things about the Christmas Season were the TV Christmas specials. In my childhood before Netflix and YouTube, these specials were only on TV during the month of December and then they disappeared for another 11 months. There were the old claymation cartoons like Frosty the Snowman and Rodolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, but my favorite, my absolute favorite was "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." The 1966 cartoon, narrated by Boris Karloff, was adapted from the book with the same name written by Dr Suess. For those of who may not be familiar with the story, the movie follows the Grinch, a grouchy, solitary creature who tries to cancel Christmas by stealing Christmas gifts and decorations from the homes of the nearby town of Whoville on Christmas Eve. Miraculously, the Grinch realizes that Christmas is not all about money and presents."

The Grinch, in all his surly grouchiness, tries to rob the Whos Christmas joy by taking their gifts, their decorations, and the food for their feast. The story says that the only thing "that the grinch left in the house was a crumb too tiny for even a mouse." By taking

everything, literally everything, the Grinch hoped to stop the celebration, stop the noise (the noise, noise, noise), and the singing. All that joy and happiness was just more than his tiny, grinch little heart could take.

In the book of Zephaniah, the nation of Israel is facing a similar situation of their joy being taken, robbed from them. Zephaniah was a prophet in Israel in around the mid-600's BC. The main theme of the book is the "day of the Lord", specifically the dire consequences that would face the nation of Judah because of their continual, willful disobedience of God's call and command on their lives. The books of Zephaniah is incredibly short, just three chapters. The first two and half chapters are the declaration of the Lord that they will be destroyed, swept away, captured. Any tribe or group who thought they were above reproach, that they were untouchable was wrong. Their disobedience has gone too far.

No doubt some members of the nation of Israel, some of the residents of Jerusalem heard Zephaniah's prophecy and were devastated. Despondent. Exile was coming, security was disappearing. Safety was gone, violence and misery would be their new companions. Just like the Whos down in Whoville, their joy was going to be taken. Robbed from them. "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the Lord. "I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea—and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble," it says in Zephaniah 1:2-3.

What in our own lives are sources of joy? Or what messages about where to find joy are we offered? When we think about Joy in the Christmas season, our culture often connects that joy to material things -presents, decorations, buying and giving that perfect gift. Or to ideas of what Christmas SHOULD be like- warm cozy fireplaces, immaculately decorated homes, happy families getting along and laughing as they enjoy Christmas dinner. And to be sure, those things often do spark happiness or joy in our lives, but what about when our holidays seasons or our lives don't include those things. What about those families who struggle to put food on the table, let alone gifts until the tree? Those folks who struggle with seasonal depression? What about the families for whom the vaccination question has been so divisive that they can't even imagine sitting down together for a meal?

Whether it's a discontent between our own expectations versus reality, a long carried illness, a fresh, searing grief, at some point, we will feel as though our joy is being robbed from us. Just like the nation of Israel. Just like the tiny residents of Whoville.

What robs us of our joy? The answer will look different for everyone. The Zephaniah passage lists many ways joy is taken. Fear. Judgement. Disaster. Oppression. Shame. Being without a home. Being alone. These feelings and experiences often feel like they can't exist in the same place as joy.

Author, speaker, and social worker Brene Brown tells a story of when her children were young. She'd tucked her daughter into bed, and came back to check on her once she'd

fallen asleep. Brene stood in the doorway to her daughters room, and like parents often do, stared lovingly at the sweet sleeping figure under the covers. She was overcome with love for her daughter, and then in the next breath, a dark thought swept, “What if I lost her? I’d never be able to live if she was gone. I would not make it.” Why does fear sweep in so quickly? Why does joy feel so fragile and fleeting?

Where, friends, do we find our joy? Sometimes in my own life, joy feels audacious to hope for, to want, to expect. Some weeks I feel like joy is transactional. Each bit of news, each experience, each conversation gets a tick mark in the column of “joyful thing” or “terrible thing.” And I just hope most days end with more a few more things in the joyful column. My own relationship with joy seems fragile, tenuous. Joy seems a thing that could be quickly buried, or like a candle snuffed out by fear, loss, or shame.

Surely some of the people listening to Zephaniah’s proclamations felt the same. In chapter 1 verse 14-16 of Zephaniah, “The great day of the Lord is near,

near and hastening fast;

the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,

the warrior cries aloud there.

That day will be a day of wrath,

a day of distress and anguish,

a day of ruin and devastation,

a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and thick darkness,

a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities  
and against the lofty battlements.”

The people of Judah and Israel at that time had decided that their joy and their security was found in their prosperity, in their status, in their fortified cities. Joy was in all the wealth that they had amassed, all the power that they had gathered up for themselves. So, when this Word of the Lord came to the people through Zephaniah, it would have been devastating. Their joy was about to disappear like our breath on a cold, winter morning.

The book of Zephaniah, for its three short chapters has the potential to be a very depressing book. Verses that foretell the destruction of a nation, the judgement of a disobedient people fill nearly the entirety of those three chapters, until in the final verses of the book this beautiful song appears.

I invite you to listen again to our text for this morning. Let the language of this wash over. “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

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[d] in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

as on a day of festival.[e]I will remove disaster from you,[f]

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

I will deal with all your oppressors

at that time.

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 home,

at the time when I gather you;

for I will make you renowned and praised

among all the peoples of the earth,

when I restore your fortunes

before your eyes, says the Lord.”

This book of Prophecy ends with a song of joy. After all the judgement that will come to the people of Israel, the Lord reminds them, “I am your joy. You can sing because you are my children. I will be with you even in fear, disaster, doubt, loss and grief.”

This song reminds the people of Israel then and reminds us now that our source of joy is found in the Lord. The one who loves us, pursues us, calls us by name and has chosen to make his home among us. “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.”

This is where Zephaniah squarely places Joy- on God being with us. How easily our joy can be misplaced, and how readily the Lord is able to restore joy to us.

Returning for a moment to our old friend the Grinch, he’s taken all the gifts, all the things that he thought brought the residents of Whoville joy, all the things that he thought made Christmas something to celebrate to the top of mount crumpet. Ready to send the whole thing over the edge. Yet, as the sun dawns of Whoville, the Who gather around the Christmas tree, hold hands and begin singing, and the grinch has an epiphany, “And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled ‘till his puzzler

was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”

Friends, Joy can come to us despite our circumstances because Christ came to us in our circumstances. The Lord is with us, and that is the source of our joy. That is the anchor that when can hold tightly to when life beats us up, when disappointments pile high and when life seems too much to bear.

So what does this mean for us? If we can and should aim to make the presence of Christ in our lives and in our world our source of joy, how do we do that? What can root us deeply into that alternative reality? We need to remain connected.

Another lectionary text for this morning offers us some guidance on how to nurture this connection. “ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry 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.” , that’s Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord. Remember that the Lord is near. Let God know the requests of your heart, your desires, your fullest self and be assured that God’s peace will keep you. Remaining connected to God through prayer, praise, rejoicing, thanksgiving and



making our requests known is a bit like wearing a pair of properly fitted glasses. I got my first pair of glasses when I was in grade four, and I still remember the feeling of slipping them on and saying, “oh! Look at how far I can see!” Prayer “corrects” our vision to see that the Lord is near, at work in our world, with us in the muck of life, and our source of joy.

Sisters and Brothers, as we dare to imagine true joy this advent season, let’s imagine ourselves a bit like those whos of Whoville. Waking to the new light. Gathering together in spite of loss or disappointment. And singing out this Word of the Lord, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;

shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

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;

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