

Advent 3 (C)
Zephaniah 3.14-20/Philippians 4.4-7/Luke 3.7-18
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
17 December 2006

THE JOY OF ADVENT

~Paul H. Friesen~

This is Third Sunday of Advent, *gaudete* Sunday, *gaudete* being the Latin word which we translate 'joy' or 'rejoice'. In the undivided medieval European church, the church that gave birth to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism four hundred years ago, the third Sunday in Advent had a different character than the rest of the Sundays. The colour switched from purple to pink to signal the community's anticipation of Christmas, the mass or Eucharist that celebrated the birth of Christ. The church experienced a flash of joy in the midst of its repentance.

The week beginning with the third Sunday in Advent became an 'ember' week, full of 'ember' days, special days of prayer—in particular the following Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. This pattern was also laid down by the Anglican reformers who created the *Book of Common Prayer*.¹ On these ember days, ordinations of clergy often took place—joyful events. And they still do in many places. I was ordained a deacon in this week.

The equivalent Hebrew words for 'joy' and 'rejoice' are used in the reading from the prophet *Zephaniah* and in the poetry from the book of *Isaiah* which we read as our Psalm together. The equivalent Greek words are used in our Epistle this morning, in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. It is important for Christians to rejoice—it is impossible for Christians not to rejoice. It arises from the character of the God we worship and the very nature of our faith. And it is something that is to be known and done throughout the year.

This past week, I had a flash of joy when I least expected it. I was on the way home for dinner, my eight-year old with me. It was already

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1962), p.100-102.

dark so we couldn't see why cars were backed up along the road in front of us. But as we got closer I saw something lying on the road, something my daughter could not quite see from her perspective. I thought at first it was a fox, but the dark and distance hampered me. Only when I was feet away did I see the body of a young deer, on its side, its head stretched out at the side of the car that had hit it. In the instant I moved past the scene I didn't take note if the light had yet gone out of its eyes. But my own eyes were riveted to something else. The car door beside it was open, and a hand (large or small, I can't recall) was stretched out stroking the side of the deer. That's all there was—no redemption, no Hollywood ending.

Why did I experience joy in the midst of this little tragedy, so often repeated when we humans put factories by lakes and roads through the woods? I think it was this. In that human hand on the side of the deer I had a flash of hope that there was some sort of deep sympathy amongst all God's creatures in spite of how badly we have done in caring for the world God has entrusted to us. God made us all, God loves us all, God puts us all in each other's keeping.

My experience of course was a small experience on the borderlands of a great human adventure. Joy arises from the recognition of great truths in the tight places we often find ourselves. It cannot be put on a flow chart or sold by corporations (secular or religious) or induced by four clear principles or seven steps, though attempts have been made and will be made. Joy is not to be confused with happiness, though happiness is most genuine and enduring when it flows out of joy and not out of desirable circumstances.

Joy arises from a situation, or better yet a life, in which human faithfulness to our creator raises our eyes to the greatness of God and opens our eyes to the wonder of his creation, including the messy place we call human civilization.

C.S. Lewis, you may know, wrote a book called *Surprised by Joy*. He was a scholar, respected for his mind, and his writing on English literature and then later for his essays and books on Christian faith. The joy which surprised him arose from a life of the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of what was right to do. His conversion from a

deeply held agnosticism to faith caught him off guard. And then so did his falling in love in mid-life.

Lewis met a divorced woman (named Joy!) and he married her for ‘immigration purposes’—she was a former communist in a messy situation back in the United States, so like a gentleman he gave her all he thought he could, in this case the right to remain in England. There was to be no more. And then he began to know her and they shared faith and a proper church wedding, and life for a few years before she died.

The joy experienced by Lewis rose up in the midst of difficult circumstances. He could not have predicted it. It arose because he met the God who made us, and was faithful in his life towards others, though he was as complicated a person as any of the rest of us, and had at least as many faults as you and I.

The prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah wrote in difficult days—the long centuries of Israel’s destruction and exile at the hands of powerful, pagan nations. Yet these prophets wrote about joy. ‘The Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation...Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations.’ These are Isaiah’s words.

Zephaniah’s words, in this case, are even more passionate: ‘Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgements against you...The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness...He will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.’ Not only does the prophet urge the people to rejoice at the great truth of God’s redeeming love, the prophet sees God take joy in the people. The capacity for joy comes right from the character of our God who brought the universe into being. When it was said in the ancient Scriptures that at creation God repeatedly announced, ‘It is good!’ wasn’t God rejoicing?

Our joy rests in God’s character, above all. This is why St. Paul could say to the Philippians: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.’ He added, ‘The Lord is near,’ the very thing we have been repeating to each other in our Advent liturgies. ‘The Kingdom of God

is at hand: repent and believe the good news.’ This is the ‘good news’ John the Baptist announced.

For Christians, joy is rooted not only in God’s good creation and the hope in its restoration. Our joy is rooted in Jesus Christ, who walked with us twenty centuries ago, who ‘lived and died as one of us’—but who did this as the incarnation of God the creator.

Christians ought not to reject ‘optimism’ or ‘happiness’, but hope and the joy that comes out of hope is a deeper thing. Joy begins with the affirmation of God’s character in communal worship. Why do we keep singing out God’s praises? Why do we repeat the mighty acts of God and the great truths of his character in the creeds? Why do we hear the same Scriptures or similar Scriptures year by year? Why do we weekly celebrate the Eucharist, giving thanks to God for our redemption? Are we that forgetful? Well, in a way we are, but perhaps that puts it all the least helpful way.

We sing out God’s praises and repeat the great truths of the creed and hear again the Scriptures and celebrate again our redemption because the greatest truths are the source of our joy. And we each are meant to build habits and lives of faithfulness—the reading of scripture, and times of prayer, and creative expressions of truth, minds that know their way through error.

These are the healthy habits that issue in joy. These allow us to praise God for another creature made in God’s image when that ungrateful wretch turns down our charity as not good enough, when that child shows no gratitude for how hard his parents work, when our best efforts do not please that cranky supervisor or negative colleague. Does joy at the great truths of God change anything? Yes, but it always first changes us.

‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice,’ said the Apostle. This is to be our habit of life, and that habit can’t help but change us and those around us. Now I come from a Christian community in which rejoicing could be a competitive sport—who could rejoice the best and be the most holy? It could become pretty

shallow! That's not what John the Baptist, or St. Paul or Jesus himself, or the prophets before them had in mind.

Joy cannot be communicated in glib phrases. But there is no art of the Kitchen or song on the lips or domestic duty or gift given that need lack the creativity that issues out of joy. Yes, there even need be no lack of joy in committee work, or in approaching 32 urgent emails—besides the 17 junk messages. Joy is not conjured up by a few words, but if it is rooted in the character of God and in God's great works joy will find its way into all the corners of our lives.

And so on this day in Advent we say, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near...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.'

These are the ember days of Advent. The pink candle shines like the first light of day. Christmas is at hand. Christ is coming.

Rejoice!