

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Zephaniah 3:14-17 *Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

There are certain things in life that are too good to be true. When a supposed Nigerian prince emails you that he would like to wire your bank account millions of dollars if you'd just give him the bank account information—well, intuitively, we just know that's too good to possibly be true. When an advertisement on Facebook pops up for a company liquidating their stock of brand-new iPhones or AirPods at 90% off the sticker price—instinctively, you know it's not even worth investigating the legitimacy of the company. That deal is simply too good to be true.

Here we are on the third Sunday of Advent, also known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete, that ancient Latin word meaning "Rejoice!" This is a Sunday of joy! And sandwiched as it is in the middle of the Advent season, a time of year when joy just seems to be bubbling up all around us as the majority of the world waits in anticipation for Christmas, joy is a very fitting theme for today. And yet, we have to ask, is the type of Christmas joy that we see being marketed all around us just another example of something that's "too good to be true"? I'll answer that for you: it is too good to be true.

Christmas joy as we hear it on the radio and as we see it portrayed on movies and advertised by stores is a type of joy only in the absence of sadness. It forces us to pretend for just a short time that everything is good, and that sadness no longer exists. And we buy into that type of joy for Christmas. Celebrations are centered around family and friends and gift-giving and a general feeling of joy and love; the day-to-day grind is put on hold, the problems of life are momentarily forgotten or ignored. But then December 26th rolls around, and what are you left with? No more of that joy, and only the grim reality of life is left in its place.

So, is the joy we're proclaiming this Gaudete Sunday simply a façade? Are we gathering around, silently agreeing not to bring up any of the pain and sorrow of life so that we can pretend momentarily that we only have reason for joy? If that were the case, then the joy of today would also be "too good to be true." But that's not the type of joy that God offers you today. And so, the theme we'll be considering today is:

Is This Joy "Too Good to Be True"?

- I. Joy only in the absence of sadness is
- II. Joy that sustains us in sadness is not

If you watch any of the many Hallmark Christmas movies that are on television this time of year, you know the type of **Joy only in the absence of sadness** that I'm talking about. Almost every Christmas movie that I know of ends with that fairytale conclusion, the stories are tied up with a nice, tidy bow on top. The star-crossed lovers finally find love, the main character is able to get home for Christmas, the kids successfully play matchmaker for their single parent, the boyfriend is secretly a prince, and

you look outside, and wouldn't you know it, it's snowing on Christmas! And the whole thing is marketed as genuine Christmas joy, "This is what it's all about!"

But we know all too well that this is not how the world works. These types of movies are simply **Too Good to be True**. Life doesn't have a nice, tidy bow on top, there's no such thing as a fairytale ending. We might find joy in those types of movies, but it's often because they distract us for an hour or two from the reality of life—which is the reality of sadness and pain and disappointment and troubles.

And tragically, we have bought into the world's narrative that sadness and joy cannot coexist. That if pain is present, if things just aren't going your way, then you don't have reason for joy. That you can't rejoice. In our Epistle Lesson, Paul wrote, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice!"*** (Philippians 4:4) And boy, how hard it is to find that joy in the Lord ALWAYS. Yes, there are times when we rejoice in the Lord, it's when things go well. We rejoice in the Lord at the birth of a healthy baby; we rejoice in the Lord when we receive a hard-earned promotion; we rejoice in the Lord when the church is flourishing.

But what about the other times? What about when the baby is not healthy, or when we lose our job, or when we look around us in the pews and there are far more seats empty than there are filled? Joy and sadness so pitted against one another as they are in our minds, when we are in the midst of sadness, we find it hard to rejoice in the Lord. In fact, at those times, it's much easier to blame the Lord. To say, "Lord, where have you gone? Don't you care? Don't you see all this evil in the world?" Searching for joy and finding rampant sadness and sorrow, we treat God in a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately type of way. We become convinced that God is punishing us for something, and it's very hard to find reason to rejoice in the Lord when you feel like He is punishing you.

But Jesus tells us, ***"In the world you will have tribulation."*** (John 16:33) The ordinary course of life will be filled with sadness and trials and disappointment. And if we can only rejoice and find joy in those times when there is no sadness to be brought to mind, then we will never find joy. Then we could only rejoice at those times when we simply pretend that sadness doesn't exist, when we block the pains out of our minds for a weekend or for a holiday. Then we can rejoice, but only for a time, and certainly not always. No, the truth is that **Joy only in the absence of sadness is Too Good to Be True**. It's not real, because we always face the reality of life in a sinful world.

So, consider with me for a moment our two other Scripture readings. In our Epistle lesson, like we've already referenced, Paul writes, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice!"*** (Philippians 4:4) It's a short text abounding with this type of always-rejoicing exhortation. In fact, if you took a few minutes to read through the rest of the book of Philippians, you'd find the entire book is abundant with this same type of joyful language. But what we might miss is the fact that Paul is formulating these words while in prison. The words of joy he expresses are being written down by hands that are in chains. So, what type of joy is this? Is he simply trying to convince himself that he has reason to be happy, when he knows there's so much to be sad over? Or is he trying to convince his readers that he's happy and that there's nothing wrong, and really he's putting on a façade?

Or consider John the Baptist from our Gospel account. He was another man in prison for preaching God's Word. While there, he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, ***"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*** (Luke 7:19) You can sense his despair, the questions that must have been haunting him. Had he thrown away his life chasing after a lie? And Jesus replies to John through those messengers by quoting from an Old Testament song of joy from Isaiah 35. So, what do

we have? Here's John, stuck in what must have been a pretty discouraging situation, and there's Jesus out in the world singing for peace and joy, and telling John, "Buck up, it will be ok." What is this, some cruel joke? It would be so if joy is something that could only be found in the absence of sadness. For that type of joy is a lie, it's simply **"Too Good to Be True."**

But that's not what Jesus is saying, that's not the type of joy that Paul was writing about, and it's not the type of joy that Zephaniah is describing for us today. When Paul wrote, **"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice,"** he may have been writing while his hands were chained, but his heart was free. Because he knew that joy is not to be found only in the absence of sadness; rather, joy is the presence of His Lord with him the midst of his sadness.

When Jesus sent the message back to John the Baptist, He wasn't replying with a shallow, "Buck up, it will be ok." Because Jesus knows that joy is not the absence of sadness, but joy is the presence of the one who comes to you in the midst of your sadness. So as John was starting to have doubts that maybe Jesus wasn't the Son of God who had come into the world, Jesus points to the signs. **"The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."** (Luke 7:22) Jesus was truly the Son of God who had come to be with mankind in the midst of their sorrow due to sin. So, He sends John a word that brings Him the Word, full of the joy of God in the midst of sorrow.

And the same thing is happening in our text from Zephaniah this morning. If you just read these few verses, brimming with peace and joy as they are, you might assume that the rest of the book is like it. But if you were to read the whole book of Zephaniah, you'd find that the rest of his prophecy is nothing like this text. When you read this text, it's all joy—singing and running and skipping through the text. But when you read the rest of the book, it's like paging through obituaries and death notices.

You see, the king of Judah at the time of the Prophet Zephaniah was Josiah, who had ascended the throne at the ripe old age of eight. Despite the idolatrous examples of his father and grandfather, Josiah grew up to be a good king. When he was 26, he began a series of spiritual reforms in Israel. He tore down the idols of his forefathers, he renovated the temple in Jerusalem, reestablished the festivals of the church year, and people began worshipping the true God again.

For the first time in decades, things in Israel were going in the right direction, spiritually speaking. But it was tough sledding. It's hard to change established habits—especially sinful ones like worshipping idols. And the people of Israel kept making excuses for their sin and disobedience to God. They blamed the neighboring nations for introducing them to false gods like Baal, Asherah, and Moloch. They blamed each other for their lack of accountability. They blamed God for everything else: bad harvests, bad rulers, bad enemies, you name it. They blamed anyone they could for their sin and troubles, everyone except for themselves.

And finally, God had had enough. So, He sent Zephaniah with a strong message of judgment: **"Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the LORD is near."** (Zephaniah 1:7) No more excuses, be quiet. For God declared, **"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth."** (Zephaniah 1:2) And then God gets into the particulars of what His wrath would bring. He describes how He'd come to sweep away priests and rulers and warriors and merchants and laborers, and then like a nightmare, He describes in the middle of chapter 1 how He keeps judging late into the night. Jehovah God says He will walk through the streets with a lantern, seeking more people to judge, laying waste to them and their houses.

And then at the end of two and a half chapters that read just like that, suddenly there's this picture of joy. ***"Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!"*** When we consider this joyful song in the context of the horrors of the rest of the book, what is Zephaniah saying to us about God? I think there's three main takeaways. **First**, that God rules over all. His judgment affects all social classes and all nations, and His rule lasts for all time. You can't get away from God. **Second**, His power is overwhelming. He is the One who creates, and so, He also has the right to destroy. And **third**, and most importantly, Jehovah God is the One who is most fully present with you even in the midst of His judgment.

And so, into this world of sorrows, Jesus came down to be *with* us. In Him we find sadness and joy tied together for eternity. We see this in the self-giving love of a Father and His Son. It's the Son's sorrowful joy to give His life for you. It is the Father's joyful sorrow to receive you on the arms of His dying Son. That Son then rises in glory and still bears those wounds. After rising from the dead in the full glory of God, He still points to those wounds to His disciples as proof of His life. In Revelation, He's described as a ***"Lamb standing, as though it had been slain,"*** to whom the whole host of heaven bows and sings, ***"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain."*** (cf. Revelation 5:6ff) The ever-present reminder of the sorrows of Good Friday giving way to the joy that results.

And the joy of what Jesus has done for you can be found then as the refrain throughout this text. ***"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. . . . The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."*** Talk about one of those things that just seems too good to be true. That God would rejoice over *me* with gladness? That God would exult over *me* with loud singing? Certainly, that seems too good to possibly be true, and yet because of Jesus, it is absolutely true. This is the **joy that sustains us in sadness**. Zephaniah's not exhorting you to rejoice because there is no sadness in your life, he's explaining that you have reason to rejoice because of the presence of God even in the midst of your sadness.

And it is true, there is nothing that will ever separate you from the love of God. As Paul expresses so beautifully, ***"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."*** (Romans 8:35-37) Sadness in life will continue, but even in the midst of it, you have still have ample reason for joy. For you have God in Heaven, the one who is able by His power both to create and destroy, singing loudly with exultation over you.

That's a picture of peace. Absolute peace in every trouble, knowing that these things will one day come to an end. But the one thing that will never end is the joy and gladness of God knowing that He has peace with you. His song of joy over you will continue into eternity. Knowing that, right now, we can sing for joy. Not because all sadness has departed, but because we have God with us through it all. So, we can sing together with the Prophet Habakkuk: ***"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."*** (Habakkuk 3:17-18) Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

Advent 3

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