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Zephaniah 3:14-20

3:14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

3:15 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.

3:16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

3:17 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

3:18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

3:19 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.

3:20 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.

Isaiah 12:2-6

12:2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

12:3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

12:4 And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

12:5 Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

12:6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4:4-7

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

4:6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

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

Luke 3:7-18

3:7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

3:8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

3:9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

3:11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

3:12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

3:13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

3:14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The words of John the Baptist from today's gospel reading are challenging to hear as well as challenging to preach. But John is a part of our Advent story. In Luke's gospel, John speaks more than in the other gospels—in fact, we could consider these words to be John's sermon.

As he talks to the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers to prepare for the One who is coming—the one who is more powerful than him—we can easily miss his message. We may find ourselves occupied in all that we normally do to prepare for the coming holiday season—putting up Christmas lights around our houses, decorating a tree, shopping, wrapping gifts, sending cards, baking, and cooking. We tend to be outwardly focused with all that is going on around us. And trying to fit all of this into our already busy lives can leave us feeling anything but JOYFUL.

A good example to illustrate how Advent and Christmas can become rather elaborate in our culture is the “Lights before Christmas” display at the Toledo Zoo. If you have ever been there, you know that the best time to go is when it's dark. Lights are strung throughout the zoo outlining the walking trails, the trees, the bushes, and many of the animal cages and habitats and buildings. People promenade along the trail taking it all in—ooohing and aaahing--- and occasionally stopping to observe one the creatures who live there and who are quite oblivious to all that is going on around them. Christmas music of all kinds is piped out to the illuminated trails through loudspeakers. Now if the light displays “don't knock your socks off” there is a lot more to do, including ice carving demonstrations, and strolling carolers. If all of this has worked up your appetite, you can stay for a meal at the Carnivore Café. And don't forget to get a family photo with Santa and then there is the gift shop, of course.

If you are someone who enjoys trivia you might be interested in some of the statistics behind the “Lights before Christmas.” A core crew of 15 employees starts hanging lights in early September. If all the lights were strung end-to-end, they would reach close to 70 miles. Nearly 50,000 feet of extension cords are used—that's almost 10 miles! The Zoo makes more than 2,700 pounds of fudge during this time, along with about 6,800 gallons of hot chocolate, more than 6,000 cinnamon pretzels, and 3,800 gingerbread men. After “The Lights before Christmas” display is over, it takes about 2 months to take down all the lights, and sort and store them for the following year. The “Lights before Christmas” can be a joyful experience, but just thinking about the time and energy that goes into this display each year can be overwhelming.

Another challenge of this gospel reading is its rhetoric. John uses some harsh language at times—“brood of vipers,” “the wrath to come,” and “unquenchable fire.” We have to remember, though that he's been living in the wilderness, dressed in camel hair skins and eating locusts and honey. He seems almost angry. It can make us a little uncomfortable. But perhaps, at times, we have to do drastic things to get people's attention. His talk is an exhortation, a strong encouragement, a word of advice to the people—that they need to go in a different direction. And we have to admit he does get the attention of the people. Each group in this narrative—the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers, respond to John by asking “What should we do?” And John has an answer for all of them, each of which has to do with human ethical behavior. To the crowds he answers, “Share your food and clothes with those who are without.” If we extend this further, they are being directed to share their wealth with those who are less fortunate. To the tax collectors, he says, “Don't collect more than the amount prescribed you” which, in essence, is saying not to take more than you need, and to be fair and honest. To the soldiers, he answers, “Don't use your power to wrong others and be content with what

you do have.” We could easily ask ourselves what does this have to do with Advent, though? Is not Advent supposed to be a time of preparing for the coming of something new—the coming of Jesus into each of our lives and into the world?

The theme of the third week of this season—which begins today—is supposed to be one of JOY. But we might wonder just where is the JOY in this passage? It looks as though we are going to have to dig deeper to find it. Just before this reading, in chapter three, Luke tells us that John the Baptist “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. Repentance? What does that have to do JOY? Well, we could argue that true repentance— turning one’s life in a different direction— opens a person to knowing greater JOY.

We can imagine the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers, in today’s gospel story, turning their lives in a different direction, in response to John the Baptist’s exhortation and direction, and coming to know greater JOY in their hearts and in their lives.

We can remember that the prophets of the Old Testament constantly called for repentance as necessary for knowing the joy of the kingdom of God.

We can tune into the psalmist, who says in addressing God, “You will show me the way of life, granting me the JOY of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever” (Psalm 16:11).

We can believe as Christians that JOY is part of God’s coming kingdom, and that it is meant for all people and for all the world. When we are JOYFUL we sing: “JOY to the world the Lord has come. Let heaven and nature sing.”

We can contemplate the words of the evangelist, Billy Graham, who said “JOY cannot be pursued. It comes from within. It is a state of being. It does not depend on circumstances, but triumphs over circumstances. It produces a gentleness of spirit and a magnetic personality.”

Perhaps the quintessential example of the JOY that comes from repentance is the character, Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dicken’s A Christmas Carol. Those familiar with this classic story will remember that Scrooge hates Christmas and refers to anything related to it as "humbug." He’s cold-hearted toward everyone he knows and even refuses to make a monetary donation for the good of the poor, claiming they might be better off dead. In the story, Scrooge is visited by several ghosts on Christmas Eve, and is told this will be his final chance at redemption. The ghosts that visit him that night take him back through his life experiences where he is shown all of his hard-heartedness toward people, and his lack of kindness and generosity. He finally repents, has a change of heart, letting go of being the miser he had become. He wakes up filled with new-found JOY on Christmas morning, buys a turkey and other trimmings and has them sent to his employee, Bob Crachit, who he had treated poorly most of his life. It’s the first of many generous acts that follow. Scrooge laughs for the first time in the story and starts reaching out to people around him with love and generosity—a true redemption that fills Scrooge with the JOY.

I had the opportunity to witness an almost indescribable JOY while I was in seminary. One year, I worked as a student chaplain in the Office of Religious Services at a state women’s prison. I remember having to pass through a metal detector every time I entered the prison. The women all dressed alike in prison uniforms—khaki shirt and pants. The prison guards called the women by their last names and each had an

assigned number. They would introduce themselves saying something like, “Hi. I’m Jones. I’m #675932.” Every move they made was watched.

Most of the women that I worked with identified as Christians; some of them served on the Christian ministry leadership team. You could say it was Advent all year round for them. These women knew about waiting. They were constantly waiting. They waited every day for the day they would get out to have a second chance at life. I found much of what these women had to endure each day to be quite depressing, yet they had a JOY about them that took me by surprise.

A number of them were involved in choirs at the prison, and they sang with JOY, not just at Advent but all year long. They sang passionately at worship services and at inmate music concerts. A favorite song was Carrie Underwood’s “Temporary Home.” I would sometimes hear one of the women singing it in the hallways. The lyrics go like this:

“This is my temporary home. It's not where I belong. Windows and rooms that I'm passin' through. This is just a stop, on the way to where I'm going. I'm not afraid because I know this is my temporary home.”

There were no Advent lights or decorations in this place to remind them of the season. Some of the women wrote poetry and I remember reading one poem that mentioned all the natural beauty of the season. It described the splendor of holly, ivy, snow and stars. I soon found myself thinking that maybe that’s all the beauty we really need at this time of year.

Christmas gift-giving is not really a part of prison culture, either. It seems what these women really wanted was the “presence” of people they love and who love them—family, friends and visitors—rather than presents that come boxed or wrapped. A line in a poem written by an inmate read: “God has taken all the worldly things, behind which you could hide.” When I read these words, I quickly wondered what I would do without all my worldly things.

I saw living, breathing joy every day in these imprisoned women—human Advent candles glowing with joy in the darkness of prison life. And it dawned on me that maybe joy shines brighter in dark surroundings. Maybe joy dwells best alongside the struggles of life. Maybe prison life can somehow point us to the real essence of the Advent season. Maybe those who live with hope in the midst of darkness are a revelation to us. Maybe they can show us what it means to live with joy in our hearts no matter the circumstances. Maybe they are the real “Lights before Christmas.”

In the opening hymn this morning, “we sang about JOYOUS angels. After the message, we will sing about JOY abounding. We will share our JOYS, as well as our concerns, and we will end the service singing “JOY to the World.” May all of our hearts be filled this Advent season and with the JOY that Jesus, the One who is coming, brings to our lives.