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Advent 3C
Peace, Seattle
December 13, 2009 epk
Zephaniah3, Philippians 4, Luke 3

JOY AND PAIN

On this third Sunday in Advent, the joy and the pain of the journey toward Christ's coming are set right next to each other, together, side by side.

The prophet Zephaniah, St. Paul in Philippians, and the Baptist in Luke each speak to a people who are thirsty—and eager for a word of God that will bring relief to their parched lives.

Zephaniah's message is one of pure joy!
SING ALOUD! SHOUT! REJOICE! EXULT WITH ALL YOUR HEART, O DAUGHTER OF JERUSALEM! NO MORE JUDGMENTS, NO MORE ENEMIES, NO MORE DISASTERS—I'M BRINGING YOU HOME, SAYS THE LORD.

This lyric from Zephaniah about a great reversal—saving the lame, gathering the outcast, changing their shame into praise, bringing them home again—**is sung by a people who have passed through tough, dry times.**

Friday night we went to see BLACK NATIVITY at the Intiman Theater.[1]
Actually, SEEING Black Nativity is only part of the story because it's a show that DEMANDS audience participation and EXCELS at breaking down barriers between those who are on stage and those who are in the audience.

During the first half of the show, the story of Christ's birth is told in song and dance, through the lens of the Black experience in America and the words of Langston Hughes, and it is powerful.
(I will never hear some of the traditional Christmas carols in quite the same way.)

During the second half of the show, players become preachers and audience becomes congregation as song after song traces the journey from exile and hope.

The most powerful of those story-songs for me was the one embodied by Josephine Howell as the woman who anointed Jesus with oil and tears, and received his healing and forgiving touch in return.
By the time she was done, there wasn't a dry face in the building.
IT MAY LOOK LIKE WERE ACTING UP HERE, Pastor Patrinell Wright told us at the end of the show, BUT EVERYTHING YOU SEE HERE IS REAL.

For many families, the holiday season is the most trying and depressing time of the year.
- Expectations around family gatherings are impossibly high;
- memories of Christmases past bring emotions to the surface,
- while anniversaries of loss circle like hungry sharks.
- Heaped on top of it all are all the messages from popular culture telling us how to spend our way to happiness.

[1] Follow the link: http://www.intiman.org/2009season/nativity

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Yet, in the midst of these stories of pain, in the midst of what can be for many a dry time, the Word of God comes crashing in, and dares to tell us – REJOICE!

When he wrote this letter to Philippi, Paul was imprisoned with no clear indication if or when he might be released. But he was able to urge rejoicing because he had come to know the presence of the Lord even when surrounded by pain and prison walls.

It's not wishful thinking, but personal testimony that stands behind his words to them:

> HAVE NO ANXIETY AT ALL, Paul writes, BUT IN EVERYTHING, BY PRAYER AND PETITION, WITH THANKSGIVING, MAKE YOUR REQUESTS KNOWN TO GOD. AND THE PEACE OF GOD THAT SURPASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING WILL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS. [Phil. 4:6-7]

American culture puts so much stake in Happiness that the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in our Declaration of Independence as an "inalienable right."

But the truth of the matter is, happiness is fleeting. Happiness is transient. Happiness is elusive—it comes and goes.

A life spent pursuing happiness for its own sake is, from the perspective of the Christian way, a life wasted. Happiness can never be captured because it's dependent upon so many other, ever-changing factors. It's more a by-product than a goal.

But JOY! Joy is God's gift to the community of faith no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. And Paul is a perfect case in point. Even from prison, JOY practically leaps off the page of this letter to Philippi: **REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS, AGAIN I SAY, REJOICE!**

Without the eyes of faith, Paul's circumstances seem perfectly drear: there is no cause for joy—only sorrow, only pain. But with the eyes of faith, Paul's prison cell is transformed into an arena of celebration and thanksgiving!

Joy becomes real for us, desert streams begin to flow, when, like him, we lift our sightline above the horizon of personal needs and desires and limitations and train them on God's promised One.

Our gospel lesson puts us face to face with the unrelenting gaze of John the Baptist.

Luke packs a lot into this text. And it sure doesn't sound much like good news.
But rather than try to unpack the whole story, I want to draw our attention to one phrase in verse 16:

> I BAPTIZE YOU WITH WATER; BUT ONE WHO IS MORE POWERFUL THAN I IS COMING...

Like Zephaniah, John speaks to a parched people; and he leads them to water: to the waters of baptism, a baptism of repentance, a reorientation of life.

John's purpose is not to point to himself, but to point beyond himself to the one "more powerful" who is about to break on the scene.

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On the surface, John's words sound more like threat than promise; look more like a dried up riverbed than a flowing stream. But when we listen closely; put our ears to the ground, we hear the deep, burbling sound of God's everflowing stream.

ONE MORE POWERFUL THAN I IS COMING...AND WHAT I CANNOT ACCOMPLISH, HE WILL ACCOMPLISH.

That COMING ONE is Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. And his coming is cause for joy.
For he comes not as one above us, not as one over us, not as one who threatens to burn us up with his righteousness, but as one who—like us—is vulnerable, who—like us—knows suffering and temptation; who takes upon himself the sum total of the failures that are ours, and turns them toward resurrection.

BEHOLD I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF A GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE!

Sisters and brothers, God is calling you and me to be a COMMUNITY OF JOY this season.

And with that calling comes a promise: that the JOY Jesus brings will be around long after the last present is unwrapped, and tree is taken down, and the lights and ornaments are put away.

Yes, God is calling us to lives of JOY this season.
Joy that believes God's voice of promise is never far from us; a promise that gathers and rises and then overflows in and with and through us, slaking our thirst, raising the horizon of our vision to possibilities we'd never even dreamed of.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say REJOICE!

May the peace of God which passes all understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.