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Advent 3C
Peace, Seattle
December 13, 2015
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Phil 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

THE WAY FORWARD: FROM PAIN TO JOY

There's a scene in *The Magician's Nephew*, book 6 of The Chronicles of Narnia, in which the main characters are suddenly transported from the world they know to a world that is utterly new to them.[1]

As they arrive, they find themselves in a barren land of absolute darkness. But before long, they hear a Voice—faint and distant at first—begin to sing, and it is the most beautiful sound they have ever heard.

Soon that single Voice is joined by a chorus of other voices, and as they listen, the blackness overhead suddenly becomes ablaze with stars: "A thousand, thousand points of light…single stars, constellations, and planets, brighter and bigger than any" they had ever known, light up the sky.[2]

As the Voice grows stronger the color at the horizon turns from black to grey to pink to gold, and just as the Voice swells to its mightiest and most glorious sound, the sun rises.

Off in the distance they see the figure of a Lion—the great Lion Aslan—huge, shaggy, marvelous—coming nearer and nearer, and they understand it was his Voice they'd been hearing all along.

Frightened, curious, and enraptured all at the same time, they watch as Aslan sings the whole Narnian world into being:

- plants emerge from the barren soil;
- wild roses, currants, buttercups, rhododendrons spring up to full flower;
- great trees, beech and fir, stretch for the sky;
- new life bursts forth in every direction as they witness the birth of Narnia itself.

The world is new and fresh and pure. Every thing every one, is thriving; all have their place. They are home.

Now if you've read any of the books in The Chronicles of Narnia series, or seen any of the films, you know that things do not always remain pure and balanced and good in Narnia. Some forces that find their way there are forces of darkness rather than light. But, as long as Aslan reigns, all will be well.

Today is "Gaudate" or "Rejoice" Sunday in our tradition, so named because of the opening words from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice."

The texts appointed for this 3rd Sunday in Advent mark a turning point in the season—when we move down the backstretch and into the final curve before next week's homecoming. Joy and hope in the midst of pain is our theme.

And indeed, 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 is about a great reversal—saving the lame, gathering the outcast, changing their shame into praise, bringing them home again.

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[1] C. S. Lewis. *The Magician's Nephew*. © 1955.
[2] Ibid, p. 99

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And while it begins with the prophet intoning the message, midstream the LORD himself takes up the song, God's Voice ringing out with promise, singing a new future for God's people into being.

The song is a powerful antidote for people who have passed through bleak, desert times.
And we seem to have entered such a time ourselves, have we not?

For many, perhaps for some of us here, the holiday season is the most trying and difficult time of the year.
- Expectations around family gatherings are impossibly high;
- Memories of Christmases past bring emotions to the surface;
- Relationships once dear to us feel beyond our reach because of old feuds or distance or death, while anniversaries of loss circle like hungry sharks.

Heaped on top of all this are messages telling us how to spend our way to happiness.

Yet, in the midst of these personal stories of pain, in the midst of what is, for many, a bleak time, the Word of God comes crashing in, daring to command us – REJOICE!

When he wrote this letter to Philippi, Paul was imprisoned with no clear understanding 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.

> 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]

Our culture puts so much stake in happiness that the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the 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 can become real for us, too, Paul seems to say, **when we lift our sightline above the horizon of personal needs and desires and limitations and train them on God's promised One.**

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Today's 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!

BROOD OF VIPERS, he shouts, WHO WARNED YOU TO FLEE FROM THE WRATH TO COME?

What is it about John's message and mission that has people flocking to a guy who talks that way?

> "The best ally of God," writes Richard Rohrer, "is what **is**—not what should be, what could be, or what needs to be. God…can always work with the real…and the 'real' is always a mixed blessing, partially light and partially dark, no matter if it's your family and friends, the groups and institutions you belong to, or yourself. The problem is not 'out there.'[3]

I think what draws people to John, what makes people experience his preaching as good news, is his utter commitment to WHAT IS, to THE REAL.

They know John won't give them a sanitized or make-believe version of the truth, but the real thing. And something happens in here (heart) when we realize we don't have to pretend any more, we don't have to put on a masquerade before the God who knows the whole truth about who we are.

The bad news: we're heading down the road to ruin. The good news: there's still time to turn around. "One more powerful than I is coming," says John, "and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

This season, events in our world have been holding up a mirror to us, and I for one am having trouble with what I'm seeing.

Many are living with fear—and having that fear stoked further by prominent figures who claim to be truth tellers. As a result, no proposal—no matter how outlandish, unconscionable, or abhorrent to American principles—seems to be off the table.

Compassion and common sense are being told to take a back seat so phobias of every kind can take the driver's seat. The truth is, these so-called solutions we've been hearing only add more fuel to the anxiety we feel. **Is this really the road God is calling us to go down?**

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

On the surface, John's words sound more like a threat; but when we listen closely we hear the deeper voice of promise—gracious, powerful.

> 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 with his righteousness, but as one who—like us—becomes vulnerable; who—like us—knows suffering and temptation; who takes upon himself the sum total of humanity's phobias and failures, and turns them toward resurrection.

[3] Richard Rohrer. *On the Threshold of Transformation.* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010.) p.153.

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This is the Savior we await this Advent season and this is the Savior we need.

So, what is it we're to be about while we wait?

As we wait for Jesus "we create a community ready to welcome him when he comes.[4]

What does that community look like?

In her letter to the Muslim-American community on Friday, our presiding bishop Elizabeth Eaton said,

> I am writing on behalf of many Christians in this country who wish to share a word of solidarity, love and hope with you in these difficult days.
>
> In this season of Advent, we, your Christian neighbors, are preparing to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who commanded "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart… [and] your neighbor as yourself."
>
> In our love for you, our Muslim neighbors, we are distressed by the ways in which you are being forced to bear the fears held by many in our nation…
>
> Therefore, we renew our commitment to find even more effective ways to protect and defend you from words and actions that assault your safety and well-being. We believe God calls us to resist what is divisive, discriminatory, xenophobic, racist or violent, and we want you to look to us as allies and friends.
>
> The global refugee and migrant crisis and the acts of terror committed in this country and around the world are challenges that demand our collective efforts and our common prayers. Therefore, we will seek to stand shoulder to shoulder with you as agents of peace, justice, understanding, welcome and reconciliation for the sake of the world that God so loves. [5]

This is the kind of community building, this is the message, we're to be about as we await the coming of Christ.

The light shines in the darkness…AND THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVERCOME IT.

Now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

[4] Henri Nouwen, *Waiting for God.*
[5] You can find the complete text of Bishop Eaton's letter here: https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7803