

# God's Song

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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In some parts of the Christian world, the third Sunday of Advent is referred to as Gaudete Sunday.

Gaudete is the Latin word for “rejoice.” It is taken from one of the readings for this Sunday, Philippians 4:4-7.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!

There was a time when the season of Advent was a penitential season similar to Lent. Gaudete Sunday was a liturgical break from penitence—a reminder that the coming of Christ was an occasion for joy and gladness.

Advent is not really seen as a penitential season any longer (unless going to the mall counts as penance, which it does for me!). Christmas joy now weaves its way throughout the season in the songs that we sing, in the lights and decorations we put up, in the general mood that surrounds us.

In my view, this is entirely appropriate. Even though I believe strongly in the importance of confession, I think that joy in Jesus' first coming ought to saturate *every* season of the Christian calendar, including Advent.

But perhaps being *told* to rejoice feels a bit weird. Shouldn't joy be spontaneous? Shouldn't it be something that kind of bubbles up out of us in response to things that naturally call forth joy, in our world and in our lives?

Rejoicing in response to a command can feel kind of like apologizing when you're told to do so (or, if you're a politician, when you get caught). It loses a bit of authenticity somewhere along the way.

And I also know that as we approach our second pandemic Christmas...

With the threat of another nasty variant looming (“Omicron” sounds like some kind of villain from a Transformers movie!)...

With other parts of the world seeing numbers growing...

With a cold winter and more time indoors on the horizon...

With nearly everyone experiencing Covid fatigue and beginning to tune out the endless warnings and finger-wagging (if we haven’t already)...

With the divisions and polarization of the last two years seeming to deepen and intensify with every day...

I know that in light of *all this*, it’s possible that joy isn’t the first or most natural thing that comes to mind on this third Sunday of Advent.

Rejoice *always*? Some of us might settle for rejoicing *occasionally* right about now!

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Gaudete Sunday is a liturgical reminder, as we near the darkest and coldest time of the year (at least in our hemisphere), and as our world continues to limp along through a difficult season, that joy is indeed a choice.

“Choose joy” sounds like a cheesy slogan from a wall-hanging at some suburban home décor store, or like a caption people post on Instagram with beautiful nature scenes in the background, but it still expresses something that is true.

Joy is a choice.

And it’s a choice that we must make again and again and again in a world where there is (and has always been) much that could easily and naturally make us the opposite of joyful, much of what could more obviously make us sad and fearful and angry and anxious.

Choosing joy is not something that we do to primarily to improve our mental health, although this certainly may be among its benefits. It’s not a way of tipping the scales in some kind of karmic formula to try to get more good things to come our way.

Choosing joy is a declaration of faith in God.

The poet Jack Gilbert expresses this truth beautifully in his poem, “A Brief for the Defense”:

We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,  
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have  
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless

furnace of this world. **To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.**

If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,  
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.

**We must admit there will be music despite everything.**

Delight is indeed a risk. Nobody really wants to be seen as a naïve Pollyanna walking around with rose-coloured glasses imagining that everything is sweetness and light.

Pessimism or, at the very least “courageous realism” is a safer bet. There is never a shortage of bad things going on in the world to justify this kind of disposition.

To risk delight is to wager with our lives that in the end it is joy, not despair that will be the last word on our world. It is a wager that goodness is stronger and more enduring than the painful and broken things in our world.

And I think the poem is right. If we make all the bad things in the world the only focus of our attention, we praise the Devil.

This morning I saw a news article whose headline imploring me to “at least try to pretend that I care” about the BC drug overdose crisis.

I paused on that headline. What was it telling me to do? Care more? How will I know when I have cared enough?

And what about all the other headlines clamoring for my attention? What about the tornadoes in the USA that have ripped so many lives apart? What about a warming planet and racial injustice and the threat of Russian invading the Ukraine? What about Syria and Ethiopia and Palestine and... ?

And this is to say nothing about the bad things going on in the smaller domains of the people I know and love.

What is true for me is true for each one of us. The human brain can only take on so much. Each one of us has a finite emotional bandwidth.

And in a media environment where bad news headlines always generate more clicks than positive ones, and where something terrible is always happening somewhere in the world, it becomes easy to just either live in a constant state of despair and anxiety *or* to just tune it all out and just focus on our own private little kingdoms and whatever pleasures we can grab for ourselves.

Neither is a good option, but I worry about how easily we gravitate toward the first one. Perhaps Christians in particular, with all kinds of good Jesus-y ideas about protesting injustice and caring for those on the margins and resisting evil, can find themselves giving too much of our attention to the bad things, and becoming sad, anxious, and fearful people.

Jesus himself, we should remember, didn't seem particularly sad or anxious or afraid. Even God Incarnate in his earthly life engaged the bad things within limits, in a relatively tiny little corner of the world with a relative handful of people.

I think Jack Gilbert is right. We should be careful of inadvertently praising the devil in how and how much we obsess about the bad things in our world.

*We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world, to again borrow the words of the poem.*

To choose joy is, in many ways, to choose God. Debie Thomas puts it like this in an essay on Gaudete Sunday:

To rejoice... is to insist that God is present, active, and faithful, even when circumstances suggest otherwise. Joy... is a muscle to exercise, a practice to honor, a discipline to cultivate. It doesn't require denial at all. What it requires is the courage to trust in a God who promises deliverance.

In other words, joy requires us to sidestep sentimentality and cynicism alike. It requires that we hold onto two realities at once: the reality of the world's brokenness in one hand, and the reality of God's love in the other. **Joy is what happens when we daily live into the belief that God can and will bridge the gap between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes.** It is a posture, an orientation, a practice. A willingness to sit gently but persistently in the tension of the "not yet," trusting that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in that in-between place for as long as it takes.<sup>1</sup>

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I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that not many of us spend a great deal of time reading the book of Zephaniah.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3246>

It's one of those easy-to-overlook minor prophets buried in the back of the Old Testament—one of those guys with names that are hard to pronounce who are always going on and on about the judgment of God.

I read the book of Zephaniah several times this week. It isn't pleasant reading, for the most part.

There is a lot of weal and woe and oracles against the people of Judah and their enemies. There's plenty of condemnation for sin, plenty of death and destruction.

But then, right at the end of this short book...

There is "music, despite everything."

It comes in a passage of restoration and renewal, of hope and promise.

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!*

That's our part. This is the choosing joy that we are called to do.

But we're not the only ones singing in this passage:

He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing (Zeph 3:17).

Zephaniah is not naïve about the way things are. He knows that the world is not as it should be, that his people are not as they should be. He knows things will get worse before they get better.

But he knows there is a song in the future of his people.

He knows that God will act, that God will come, that God will again rejoice in his people and they in him.

He knows that God will rescue the lame and the oppressed. He knows that God will deal with all who threaten them and liberate them to live free from the fear that so easily comes to dominate their lives.

He knows that they will be forgiven, that their punishment will be taken away.

He knows that God will gather up his people and bring them home.

All of this *God will do*. Not us. God.

Zephaniah knows that God's song is ultimately a love song.

I wonder, what is your reaction to verse 17?

*He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

God will rejoice over me? God will be glad about me? God will exult over *me*?

Many of us can barely imagine being the occasion of God's joy, God's song.

We're used to being told to do better for Jesus, to having a vague sense that God is more often than not displeased with us.

Aren't preachers always going on and on about how sinful we are?

Aren't big chunks of the bible full of nasty warnings about the consequences of human rebellion?

Doesn't Jesus himself have more than a little to say about our bad behaviour (the ax is at the root of the tree, and all that!)?

Isn't religion mostly about getting us fixed up and cleaned up sufficiently to be presentable for a severe and demanding God?

(Indeed, many forms of religion aren't that different from the news—bad news is far more marketable than good! Which is terribly ironic given that we claim to be people of *good news*!)

For many of us, the idea that God looks upon us with joy—that we are or could *ever* be a source of divine *delight*—is hard to imagine.

But it's true. You are a source of joy to God. God wanted you to be. You make God want to break out into song.

Yes, Jesus takes sin seriously. Yes, we can do things that break God's heart. Yes, we are always summoned to live lives that are ever truer to the God in whose image we were created.

But the deep truth that precedes all our striving is that God loves us. We make God happy. God thinks that we are a pretty good idea.

We make God want to break forth in song.

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*There will be music despite everything.*

Zephaniah looked ahead to a day when God would restore the fortunes of his people. He didn't know exactly what it would look like, but he knew that it would be what he and his people needed.

There is much that we, too, do not know about the future that God has promised. But we have hints. My favourite book by C.S. Lewis is a little one called *The Weight of Glory*. In it, Lewis says that every experience of joy and goodness and beauty on this side of eternity points beyond itself:

[these] are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.<sup>2</sup>

Because of Jesus, we know more than Zephaniah did about what God's future will look like.

The baby in the manger who comes to be one of us, wrapped in human flesh and vulnerability, the one who will come to know what it is like to be human from the inside... this is the one who gives us clues about the scent of a flower we have not found.

The refugee boy who flees for his life and who throughout his lifetime will be consistently drawn to the outsider, the one who is rejected and doesn't belong... he is the echo of a tune we have not heard.

The one who had no place to lay his head, the one who was misunderstood and mistreated, the one who gave his life for his friends and for his enemies and taught us to do the same... the is the one who is the news from a country we have never yet visited.

This Jesus is the one who will, in Zephaniah's words,

- give victory

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity, and the Church* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 98-99.

- takes away all judgment against us
- deliver us from fear
- renew us in his love
- turn away our enemies and deals with all oppressors
- save the lame and gathers outcast, transforming their shame into praise
- rejoice over us with gladness

And so, on this third Sunday of Advent, even though there is much that is ugly and broken in in our world, even though there is plenty that does not naturally call forth joy, I urge you to do this one thing.

Rejoice. The Lord your God is near. He sings over you with joy.

*There will be music, despite everything.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

