

## **“Rejoice”**

**Zephaniah 3: 14 –17, Philippians 4: 4-7**

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### **Third Sunday in Advent**

**Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem. The Lord has removed your judgment; He has turned away your enemy. The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst; you will no longer fear evil. On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem: Zion, do not fear. Do not let your hands fall. The Lord your God is in your midst – a warrior bringing victory. He will create calm with his love; He will rejoice over you with singing.**

Philippians 4: 4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always! Let me say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness show in how you treat all people. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, bring up all your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

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In the Presbyterian Church tradition, there are two historic Catechisms that begin with the same core question: The Question is: “What is the chief end of man?” i.e. what is the goal of human existence? The answer: “To glorify God, and enjoy God forever.”

We are pretty good at the first part. Glorifying God. But that second part we tend to fall down on: to enjoy God forever.

Teddy Roosevelt’s eldest daughter, Alice, thought Calvin Coolidge was so sour looking, she said: He looks as if he had been weaned on a pickle. I’m not sure that a whole lot of Christians don’t end up Looking like we’ve been baptized in pickle juice. But if the goal of our existence has to do with enjoying God throughout eternity, don’t you think it makes sense to start practicing now?

The Bible has 23 different words or phrases for joy. Rejoice! Have you ever thought rejoicing as a spiritual practice? This third Sunday of Advent is the day of the pink candle. Like Monty Python’s archbishop taking out the holy hangrenade, the pink candle explodes our pickle-pussed Presbyterianism, to remind us that joy is what we need to understand God. And joy is something we need to practice.

Winston Churchill: was known to be something of a drinker. In one public gathering, a Woman stood up in front of the crowd and criticized him: “Mr. Churchill, I suppose that if this entire room were filled with whiskey bottles, you would see it as your duty to drain every one of them.” Churchill responded, “So much to do, so little time.”

We too have so little time, there is no time like the present to start practicing joy. Brain scientists tell us that the human brain is divided into three parts. The most interior area: sometimes called the reptilian brain – that is where we go when we are scared. Center of Fear. Fight or flight.

When that is the part of the brain that is primarily functioning, your range of vision narrows. Literally, you don't see as much. In this reptilian brain, we intensify our anxiety. We become very serious. The creativity stops: This reptilian brain can rule over us: Dominate our consciousness so that we are always afraid.

The outer part of the brain: that is where the creativity resides. That is where the sense of hope, vitality, even playfulness born of our trust in God resides. Faith and laughter are how we get there. Rejoice in the Lord always. Say it again: rejoice! Faith and Laughter are the beginning of a jail brake away from the fearfulness of our reptilian master.

The way people read the Bible: is often so serious: Lots of anger and judgment. Fear based faith. In reality, there is so much humor: Hebrew is full of poetic word plays: it is often hysterical. It rarely gets translated that way: it's translated by the pickle-pussed people. That is why Bible study is so important – to dig into the text and be surprised by the playfulness, irony and joy.

Joy is an act of emancipation from the prison house of the self. When we are free to laugh, life opens up. We see a bigger perspective.

Our Attitude toward life matters. It changes our perception: what we are able to see -- what is out there, what is possible, what is coming. We need to practice rejoicing to be able to see.

In medieval time, there was a special festival called The Feast of Innocents. For that one day, these very dour formal monasteries and towns would turn the world upside down. Even the grandeur of the holy office of bishop was suspended. In the bishop's place, they put a child. How would the church be different if a child was in charge?

One Advent season a few years ago, our organist was in charge of the pageant. She was dividing up roles among the children: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, all were chosen. Now she was asking the other children: What animal do you want to play? Sheep. Goat. Donkey. Cows. The last little girl: What animal do you want to be? "I want to be the kitty."

Her request so delighted the organist, so that on this particular year, our Christmas pageant starred Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, and the Christmas kitty.

Maybe the pink Candle is there to remind us: Are you open to changing the script of your life? To changing roles? Making room for new ideas? Playing with reality to make room for more rejoicing? You see, sometimes, When we laugh at ourselves, it is a profound act of humility, which is associated with the greatest virtues.

That humility overcomes what theologian Conrad Hyers says his picture of Hell is a state where everyone is perpetually concerned with their own dignity and status, and where everyone has a complaint. Hyers says: "The castle that protects the king also imprisons him." The right kind of laughter sets us free.

Anthropologists have this wonderful word: liminality. It is when the world as we know it has broken down. In this time, often of utter confusion, we don't know which way we will go. Like that piece of interstate in downtown St. Paul: spaghetti junction. Driving through, I have no idea where I will end up. I know for a moment: all options are open. For all I know, one of those roads may lead to Narnia.

Liminality: that time when all sorts of options are open. A time and place when we play with ideas. Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* is liminal.

In that betwixt and between moment of Christmas Eve, Scrooge has these three dreams of past, present and future. Which way will he go afterwards? Which road will he choose? Will he end up like Marley, shackled for eternity by his greed and hardheartedness? We only discover that Scrooge has broken the chains that bind him on that beautiful Christmas morning, when he begins to laugh.

Laughter is a sign that the chains are broken: The chains of fear, the chains of hopelessness, worry, self-centeredness...even the chains of death.

Joy and laughter do many things to open us up. Laughter helps us dispose of conflicts that really don't matter. If you want to connect with someone, make them laugh. If you want to take someone out of a miserable mindset, make them laugh. If you want to change the world, make the world laugh.

If you want to laugh, read the gospel of Luke: and look for how the world gets turned upside down and inside out. Jesus says: Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me. It means, blessed is the one who gets the joke.

The comic twist redefines the world. I'm looking for the Christmas card that says: Christmas means: Expect the unexpected. Remember, regarding the coming of the Messiah: the high priests had been looking for one thing: and got a mother. (*wait for it*)

The great writer, James Thurber, overheard someone who was on his high horse, the man very ceremoniously pontificates: "We are NOT going to HIDE OUR HEADS in the SAND like KANGROOS." Thurber says he was saved by the simile. Forever after that, Thurber said whenever he heard someone attempting to lead him into the land of fear and anxiety, Thurber would remember those kangaroos with their heads in the sand. Then he could face anything.

The Bible says, "Rejoice in the Lord. Say it again: rejoice." The greatest joy is not to laugh at others, but to laugh with others. To share a moment of joy, where the barriers come down. Mother Teresa said to always meet one another with a smile, because a smile is the beginning of love. Instead of hearts being hardened, they are softened.

When we rejoice, we become playful. We recover a sense of childlikeness. We are playing a game: and God gives us a new beginning.

Humor always has an element of risk. Sometimes humor can offend people. If I have offended you with my humor, I apologize. I did not mean to offend. It's just, so far, there does not seem to be a cure for my condition.

My favorite preaching professor was an imposing, brilliant preacher. I follow his homiletical theory almost every Sunday. Except for one thing: he believed the preacher should never make the congregation laugh. I must be such a disappointment.

But I believe the essence of humor is this: We start off in the expected world – then we are taken someplace new. Every bit of humor has an element of surprise. Which is to me what the Christmas story is about. Jesus coming to take us someplace new. A new reality. A new world. We have to be open to the surprise.

Do you know the story of the Mother superior in a convent? She was 100 years old. It was her last days. Bedridden. Fading fast. Maybe few hours left. The Sisters thought they had one last time to hear her wisdom. One of them poured her a glass of milk. Then, after a second thought, put in a stiff shot of whiskey. They gave it to her. She took a sip. Another sip. Another. Pretty soon, she drained the whole glass. She began to speak. She whispered. They all leaned in. She said, "Whatever you do.... Whatever you do... don't sell that cow."

It's like Julian of Norwich said: "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is a habit – you have to cultivate it. When we enter into joy, we defy despair.

For Christ comes as a surprise. When we laugh and rejoice, we are more ready for the surprise. The baby Jesus is about the rebirth of our faith, and the rebirth of our life, in ways that surprise and delight us.

If fear deforms the human image, then the birth of Jesus reforms us. Rejoicing reconnects us not only to other human beings, but to the God who is the cause of our rejoicing. The God in whom our existence finds its truest meaning and goal. The God in whom we look forward to rejoicing throughout eternity.

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