**Jesus Comes to Bring Us Joy**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**

**Philippians 4:4-7**

12/24/14

One Christmas Eve, in my church out in Colorado, I got up to welcome people and out of habit said “Good morning.” Without batting an eye, the whole congregation said right back to me, “Good morning.” We are so used to worship on Sunday morning that it is hard to get out of the habit.

One congregation had a regular evening worship service. They had an announcement in their Sunday morning bulletin about their evening service. “At the evening service tonight the sermon topic will be, ‘What is hell like?’ Come early and listen to the choir.” I’m glad that we don’t have that problem here. That was actually printed in the bulletin. Here are a few other bulletin bloopers I’ve collected.

* Announcement in the church bulletin for a National PRAYER & FASTING Conference: "The cost for attending the Fasting and Prayer conference includes meals."
* Thursday at 5:00 pm there will be a meeting of the Little Mothers Club. All ladies wishing to be "Little Mothers" will meet with the pastor in his study.
* For those who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
* Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Don't forget your husbands.

A pastor received a thank-you note from a newlywed couple in his congregation. “Dear Pastor, I want to thank you for performing our marriage ceremony. It was beautiful the way you brought my happiness to a conclusion.”

Of course, pastors tend to get in as much trouble as anyone. One time a pastor was giving a children’s sermon and talking about Bethlehem. He told the kids “Bethlehem was a small town. In fact it was so small, I’ll bet they didn’t even have a Pizza Hut.” One young lad responded, “Maybe that had a Little Caesar’s.”

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence he wrote about our unalienable rights. Do you remember what they are? Life, liberty, and the pursuit of *happiness*. How many of us are really happy? Are our lives are overflowing with joy? We have moments when we laugh, times when we feel a bit of happiness. Other times we put on a happy face and pretend that everything is fine, even though we may be miserable inside, or just bored.

The good news of Christmas is that Jesus came 2000 years ago, is with us today, and will come again in the future, to bring us joy. Do you remember what the angel said to the shepherds when he announced the birth of Jesus? “I bring you good news of ***great joy”*** (Luke 2:10). The night before Jesus was arrested he was in the upper room teaching the disciples. He told them, “I have said these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). In Philippians Paul invites us to “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).

I don’t know about you, but when I think of the Bible and joy, I think of the passages I just read from the New Testament. Other than in the Psalms I don’t think of joy as a theme in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. Yet our passage from Zephaniah is all about joy. Most of Zephaniah is about the approaching judgment of God. It talks about the day of the Lord, what we as Christians call the return of Christ, when the world will end and God will punish people for their sins. These last verses are different. The subtitle in my Bible is “A Song Of Joy.” Zephaniah calls us to “rejoice and exult with all your heart.” He gives us four reasons why we can rejoice.

First, we can rejoice because God has forgiven our sin. “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you” (Zeph. 3:15a). Every Sunday, in some form or another, we confess our sin. The liturgists usually lead that part of the service. When I send them information about the various parts of the service they will lead it includes some different ways that they can introduce the prayer of confession. By far, the most common introduction to confession that liturgists choose is this:

The best that you can do will never deserve God’s love

The worst that you can do will never keep God from loving you and forgiving you.

All of us have sinned and need God’s forgiveness. The good news of Jesus Christ is that we have been forgiven and our sins removed. Through his life, death and resurrection, our relationship with God restored. That is why we sing:

Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King.

Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”

We have joy because we are forgiven.

The second reason we can rejoice is because God has defeated our enemies. “He has turned away your enemies” (Zeph. 3:15b). Zephaniah describes God as “a warrior who gives victory” (Zeph. 3:17b). In verse 19 God says “I will deal with all your oppressors.” For Zephaniah the enemies were obvious. There were foreign countries threatening Israel. Our enemies may not be so obvious, but they are just as real.

I could get myself in trouble by naming specific groups or people as enemies. Some people we might agree on. Others, probably we wouldn’t. Anything that draw us away from God’s desire for our lives is our enemy. Anyone who destroys life is an enemy, which means that death is our ultimate enemy. We’ve had two members of this church experience the death of loved ones in the past week. The good news is that through Jesus our enemies have been defeated, even death. Therefore we can rejoice.

The third reason we can rejoice is because God is present with us. “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst” (Zeph. 3:15c). “The Lord, your God, is in your midst” (Zeph. 3:17a). That is what Christmas is all about – Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

There is a fable that comes out of India, about a tiger cub who lost its mother and was adopted by a family of goats. The goats raised this tiger to live like a goat. He spoke their language and ate their food. The tiger grew up thinking he was a funny-looking goat. One day a king tiger appeared and all the other goats ran away. This young tiger was left alone, afraid but not afraid. The king tiger asked him what he was doing, living like these goats. All the tiger cub could do was bleat – “baaa.” The king tiger picked up the cub and carried him to a pool, where the cub could see his own image and the image of the king tiger. Finally, the young tiger realized who he was and let out an exultant roar.

It was the presence of king tiger that enabled the cub to realize his true identity. It is the presence of Jesus Christ, our King, that enables us to discover who we really are. We are made in the image of God. We are God’s beloved children. That is our identity. Through sin our identity has been distorted, maybe even lost. Jesus, through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, through his presence in our life, enables us to realize who we are and become the people that we were created to be.

Zephaniah gives us a fourth reason to rejoice. Not only is God present with us, He likes us. In fact, God loves us. Verse 17, “He will rejoice over you with gladness… he will exult over you with loud singing.”

Several small groups here have been reading through Max Lucado’s book, “The Applause of Heaven.” That was actually the first Lucado book I ever read. Tanya gave it to me for Christmas 22 years ago. Let me read to you a few sentences from the introduction:

Certain things about God are easy to imagine. I can imagine him creating the world and suspending the stars. I can envision him as almighty, all-powerful and in control. I can fathom a God who knows me, who made me, and I can even fathom a God who hears me. But a God who is in love with me? A God who is crazy for me? A God who cheers for me? That's hard to imagine.

Friends, God is passionately in love with you. God thinks of you and rejoices! He exults!

I have in my wallet 5 pictures. Four of them are pictures pictures of the four most important people in my life: Tanya, Laura, Brian, and Alli. I carry their pictures so that I can show them off to anyone who asks. I carry their pictures because I am madly in love with them.

God has your picture in his wallet, and he shows off your picture to the angels. “Look, here is Terri. Not only is she a fabulous singer and wonderful in working with children, she servant’s heart. Here’s Rob. He doesn’t like getting attention but let me tell you, he works as hard as anybody around that church. Here is Heather, she does an amazing job of helping people get to know each other. Here’s Jen. She makes the best sugar pecans and has a great sense of humor. Here’s Joe, and Jan, and Pete…” God loves you. God exults over you.

Friends, our lives can be filled with joy when we remember that God has forgiven us and destroyed our enemies. We can be filled with joy when we remember that God is present with us and is passionately in love with us. One last story for you.

A cowboy rode into town and stopped at a saloon for a drink. Unfortunately, the locals had a habit of picking on strangers, which he was. When he finished his drink, he went outside and saw that his horse was gone. He walked back into the bar, flipped his gun into the air, caught it above his head without even looking and fired a shot into the ceiling. WHICH ONE OF YOU SIDEWINDERS STOLE MY HOSS?" No one answered. "ALRIGHT, I'M GONNA HAVE ANOTHA BEER, AND IF MY HOSS AIN'T BACK OUTSIDE BY THE TIME I FINNISH, I’M GONNA DO WHAT I DUN IN TEXAS! AND I DON'T LIKE HAVE TO DO WHAT I DUN IN TEXAS!" He sat down and ordered another beer. When he finished it he walked outside, and his horse was back! He saddled-up and started to ride out of town. The bartender wandered out of the bar and asked, "Say partner, before you go... what happened in Texas?" The cowboy turned back and said, "I had to walk home."

One last laugh to remind us of the never-ending joy we have through Jesus. He came into our world 2000 years ago. He is present with us today and at some point in the future will come again, so that we might have joy. “Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I will say, rejoice.”