

“Fear verses Faith”

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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Third Sunday in Advent: Joy

“Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there.” This anonymous quote can be found in many places and I have read that it hung over the fireplace at the old Boar’s Head Tavern in London, which served as a theater. It encouraged aspiring young actors struggling with stage fright.

Don’t you wish combating and overcoming fear was that easy. Is there really such a thing as fear-busting faith? Perhaps we should listen to our texts before answering this question.

Even a casual reading of our primary text reminds us that fear is real. “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You will fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion. Do not let your hands grow weak” Zephaniah 3:15b-16.

The ancient Jews lived in constant fear of disease, drought, want and their enemies. They were far too familiar with uncertainty, disappointment and confusion and no one voiced this better than Zephaniah.

This seventh century prophet wrote what many consider the gloomiest book in the Bible. It rained everyday in Zephaniah’s world, and understandably so. He was driven to near despair over the sorry condition of Judah’s life in the years following the reign of some evil leaders, chief of whom was Manasseh. It was apparent to Zephaniah that it was only a matter of time until Judah fell and her citizens would be taken into exile. Thick, dark clouds were swirling.

Has it been raining in your life a lot lately? Are you living under thick, dark clouds, too? Ever since the economy spiraled out of control eighteen months ago, people have been restless, anxious and fearful. This is not the only cause for anxiety, but perhaps the most pressing one.

What do your fears look like this morning? Have you identified and voiced them? What toll have they taken upon you?

One thing I know they are doing is robbing you of joy. It is hard to be joyful and afraid, isn’t it? Just because the Advent calendar focuses our attention this morning upon joy, it doesn’t mean it has happened in every heart. People sinking under the weight of worries struggle to see any reason to celebrate. I understand.

Before you declare this to be a blue Christmas, however, give faith a chance to speak. Through our texts, what does it say? For me, it is this. **Joy can be found even in the midst of adversity.** How?

Our faith boldly proclaims that we are not alone. God is with us. He knows who we are, where we are, what we are experiencing and is committed to helping us with life’s stiffest challenges.

There is a common thread that flows through the lectionary this morning, and it is this. **God is in our midst.**

Zephaniah mentioned it twice. Isaiah wrote, “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O Royal Zion, for great **in your midst** is the Holy One of Israel” Isaiah 12:6.

Paul instructed his readers to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. **The Lord is near.** Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” Philippians 4: 4-7.

Even John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and forerunner of Jesus declared that “one who is more powerful than **I is coming**” Luke 3:16.

The proximity and accessibility of God are not in question in these texts. He was on that journey with the ancient Israelites and the early Christians. He will be with us, too.

Furthermore, Zephaniah assured his readers that God would never abandon them.

Zephaniah has multiple images of God in this text, and one is a loving parent. “The Lord your God is in

your midst, a warrior who gives victory. He will rejoice over you with gladness. **He will renew you in His love.** He will exult over you with loud singing as in the day of the festival” Zephaniah 3:17.

It is the word for love that Zephaniah used that is so intriguing. He did not use the standard word found in many of the covenant writings, hesed, which denotes faithfulness or loyalty. He used the word, ahabah, which portrays unconditional love.

What was Zephaniah’s message? There was absolutely nothing that the Israelites could do that would make God quit loving them or let them go. His love was as certain as that of a parent for a child.

This was good news for those who heard it, because they weren’t always loveable or were constantly in need. However, like a mature parent, God still loved them and was committed to helping them along their journey. Through prophets like Zephaniah, the people were assured that God would provide the strength they needed so their “hands would not grow limp or weak,” a way of describing paralysis. It is similar to our phrase, “weak knees,” a metaphor for being intimidated by a challenge or problem.

Whatever the Jews faced would not be encountered alone. Always and under all circumstances, God would be with them and help them. Their troubles would not have the final word in their lives; God would and that word would be good.

I like the way Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth describes the kind of joy in our texts. According to him, it is a defiant, “nevertheless joy.”

“It is not a giddy, senseless type of joy, unaware of the harsh realities of life,” as scholars have so well-stated. “It is anchored to an acknowledgement of God’s loving presence and can take root in darkness. It takes seriously the difference between God’s hopes for human life and the realities of life as it is actually lived.”

Do you need to hear this good news today? Are you struggling under a load of care that is robbing you of joy? Have your hands and knees grown weak? Do you need courage, confidence and strength for the living of these days? Will you open your life to God and allow Him to walk with you?

A few decades ago, Patricia Neal was nominated for an Academy Award as best actress for her magnificent performance in *The Subject Was Roses*. “How were you able to perform at such a high level?” she was asked by a reporter. This was an appropriate question in light of the fact that Ms. Neal was recovering from three massive brain hemorrhages and five heart attacks. In addition, her daughter, Olivia, contracted measles and died quite suddenly. Now you understand the question.

Ms. Neal’s response was interesting. She pointed to a large copper plaque and said that was the secret. The reporter looked up to read these words. “Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there.” I suppose there really is such a thing as fear-busting faith.

Do you have this kind of faith that leads to “nevertheless joy?” You can if you open your life to Christ and let him accompany you on your journey. I assure you that he will provide the encouragement and support you need.

Who do you know that needs this kind of faith? Who needs to hear this kind of good news? Who is struggling under a load of care and needs a friend? What could you do to help them? Do it and I believe both of you will discover true joy.