

Singing for Joy

As much as I love music, I have never been able to carry a tune. But if I am happy, and no one is around to hear, I find that I will be either singing or humming a tune. Biblically speaking, people are called to both sing and shout with joy as they praise God for all that God is and does in their lives. Today our passages as well as the Advent wreath speak of joy. They echo this call to experience the joy found in relationship with God. Philippians 4:4 is a clear command related to this theme. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice!” We are to rejoice because the Lord is near. I think that most of us like passages like this one from Philippians that calls us to experience joy. More than that, I think that the desire to experience joy is also found in the things which we do in our daily lives—we like to do things that bring us happiness—that we enjoy doing. I am an avid reader and enjoy several different genres, but whatever the genre I want the story itself to have a good ending—which means to me that somehow the plot twists and turns have managed to conclude with a happy ending—the crisis overcome, any tragedy is averted, etc. I am not a fan of movies or videos, but if I am watching them I have the same criteria about the endings. Both my children prefer movies or TV series to reading. They especially like to record a whole TV series and then fast forward through the commercials, viewing episode after episode. But media in whatever form you watch or read is an artificial system; it has been created and finished before you even begin reading or viewing it. That is not the way life actually happens. In living day to day, we don’t get to fast forward through the difficult or unhappy experiences to an assured happy ending. In a sense this concept of fast forwarding through media forms of entertainment seems to be a description presented in three of the four texts this morning. Paul’s words are meant to guide the Philippians as they await the return of Jesus Christ which is believed to be imminent. Paul himself was probably under house arrest in Rome. Paul found that he could rejoice even under those conditions because the Lord was near—not just in the sense of the second coming, but present with him in his imprisonment. The recipients of Paul’s letters were living in difficult times—but they were encouraged not to worry because the Lord was near. They were to give thanks by prayer letting their request be made known to God. These actions would bring them the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding. Trusting in the Lord’s nearness would bring them peace and give them cause to rejoice. While waiting for Christ’s return, they were to continue doing whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable so that God’s peace would be with them. Some two thousand years after Paul’s writing we are still living in anticipation of Christ’s return. The passage from Isaiah 12: 2-6, written long before the birth of the Christ child is also about waiting for the day of the Lord to come. The day of the Lord was understood to be the day when God’s reign would take effect and God’s judgment would be pronounced upon the people. In Isaiah 12: 2-6, the passage is about that day, but speaks of what happens beyond the time of judgment. Isaiah relates this message about the day of the Lord. The people will know and declare “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.” Because God has become salvation, joy will be experienced. Isaiah 12:6: “Shout aloud and sing for joy, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.” The text

from Zephaniah is also one which also urges the audience to shout, to rejoice and exult with all their hearts. If we examine the context of the prophets, we have to wonder from where all these calls for rejoicing come. Isaiah lived during the period when Israel became a puppet state and her people were taken into exile, first by Assyria and then Babylon. Jeremiah, who is also known as the weeping prophet, was a contemporary of Zephaniah. Where in their experiences was there a basis for joy? Beyond today's passages, the messages of both Isaiah and Zephaniah were more about the coming judgment of God; expressions of God's displeasure with the people and their way of living. They frequently spoke of the doom which awaited them just over the horizon. Yet within the message of judgment these prophets found the Lord gave them a message of hope, a message that there would be redemption—salvation—in their future. These prophets recognized there was a period of devastation of all that they knew coming—but they fast-forwarded through their current reality to the vision of what would come when God's reign dominated the world; a vision of what happened when "that day" came. These calls to joy from the prophets are ones we like to hear as Advent is a season of joy. Advent is a time of waiting—of hopeful expectation; a time of celebrating the fulfillment of the promised salvation through Emmanuel. As our passages from the prophets today illustrate the words of devastation and judgment that they gave the people were not seen as the last word. Even Zephaniah who is sometimes called the gloomiest prophet kept the last word for joy—joy over the Lord's presence, joy over renewal and restoration, joy over coming home. All of these things were cause to shout and sing for joy. What we don't like to contemplate so much are those words of judgment which preceded these words of salvation, redemption and joy. That is why on this day when we lift up joy as our theme, the text from the gospel—from the good news—strikes such a different note. The appearance of John the Baptist on this Sunday about joy is quite a juxtaposition. Zephaniah says sing and shout, be renewed in God's love. I will bring you home. Very nice. The epistle reading from Philippians calls us to rejoice in the Lord always. Do not worry. Pray. Peace will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. A lovely picture. Then we come to Luke's version of John the Baptist hard at work in the wilderness. It seems like a set up for a test question: Which of these is not like the others? John's opening salvo makes that pretty clear. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Not even the Grinch who stole Christmas casts a more jarring note into the collection of expressions of joy. For John is not fast forwarding past the judgment, but has put the narrative on pause. John is not ready to join the chorus singing with joy. Instead John tells us that true rejoicing comes only after true repentance and real-life reparations. True rejoicing comes only after an acknowledgement that without the intervention of God on our behalf, we are lost. Because of John we receive the warning—so there is time to repent, mend our ways and be ready to meet the One who follows John. Only Luke has the various constituencies in the crowd ask John what they need to do to make their repentance tangible. Only Luke gives each an ethical to do list. John tells them they need a moral compass, a life code, a lived-out agenda of faith. There are no excuses now. We can't say we don't know. To the crowds (read everyone, all of us): Share. If you have two coats give one to someone who has none. The same thing applies to food: share. Those considered the least ethical in the crowd—tax collectors—who were the least respected and most disdained members of the society—were told that they must live with integrity. Collect no more than the law proscribed. Soldiers, those who were given the task of keeping order for the empire, also must live in ways

that reflect the will and characteristic of the One who is coming. Do not use power, the ability to exert violence or extort money, make no false accusations. Be satisfied with your wages. In other words, repentance results in changed behavior. Like those who came to John the Baptist in the wilderness, we often ask the same question: What should I do? What must we do to be able to rejoice in the Lord always? Be welcomed home in God's love? Receive the peace that will guard our hearts and minds? The short answer is: nothing and everything. Nothing we do can or does save us. Nothing we do fully bridges the divides we create, erases the wounds inflicted by self or others, rolls back the clock on regrets or mistakes. The last verse of this passage from Luke tells us, "with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Ultimately, John's warnings and exhortations to this brood of vipers—us—equals good news. Jesus, the one whose sandal thongs John was not worthy to untie, comes to save sinners, to burn our chaff and bring redemption. Jesus hears our cries and answers with grace, mercy, and the sacrifice of himself in order to make the amends we never could. So how then can we not change our behavior? How can we not mold our actions into a better imitation of him? What should we do? We should remember what Christ has done for us and rejoice. Rejoice, knowing that the Lord has taken away the judgment against us. Rejoice, in the sure knowledge of God's abundance and our privilege in steward all the gifts with which we have been entrusted. Rejoice, trusting that when we act out of integrity because our lives have been transformed through the love of the Triune God, other lives may be changed for good also. Each disciple of Christ who has been moved by the present, the coming and the inexplicable grace of God to ask, "What should I do?" has an invitation, in whatever job, role or position they occupy to answer that question in real-world ways that exhibit grace, mercy, kindness, love, honesty, humility and integrity. In doing so, through the power of God, we participate in the divine transformation of the world and the coming of God's reign. Surely a cause to sing for joy. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.