



SERMON

Light the Candle for Joy

Habakkuk 3:17-18 and Zephaniah 3:14-17

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

Browse through any local book store and you will be bombarded with books on joy. Joy of Cooking, Joy of Sex, Joy of Not Working, The Complete Joy of Home Brewing –just to name a few. Our Advent word for consideration today is JOY. The Bible is full of joyful sayings:

“The joy of the Lord is our strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10)

“Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy.” (Luke 2:10)

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4)

The words of one of our favorite carols expresses the deep joy of the season.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME!

Surprise, surprise God is here! “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) Most of us live routine lives. We eat at the same restaurants, watch the same shows on TV or Netflix, shop at the same websites or in the same stores, and sit in the same pews at church. Life is just easier that way.

When surprises surface in our lives they are often surprises of disaster. The snow storm was terrible, the news was brutal, the world scene was incomprehensible. Just when we think that predators and imposters have hit the pit, they find new uses for social media. What would it take for us to be surprised by joy?

The most incredible surprise I know is that the Lord is come. Not has come, not will come, but is come. In every other religion of the world, humanity is reaching for God. They climb mountains, observe rituals, pursue meditations, keep the spiritual law in hope they will someday, sometime, somehow be able to connect with the Divine and satisfy their spiritual hunger. Christianity is different. In Christianity God pursues us. God is the good Shepherd in search of the one lost sheep. God is the loving parent waiting with open arms for the prodigal to come home. God is the Lord of the universe incarnate in an embryo in order to save us from our sins.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE SAVIOR REIGNS!

I think it was theologian, Karl Barth, of the last century who said the whole Christmas story is contained in those words, “A Savior is born for you,” not just for shepherds, not just for magi, not just Anna and Simeon and the early believers, but a Savior born for you, for me.

Could we use some saving today? There was a time when I thought being saved consisted of walking down an aisle, kneeling at the cross and repeating the words that Jesus was my Savior. Such acts of faith can be good beginnings, for God will honor even one step of faith. But salvation is so much more than a personal response to a public appeal. Salvation is the transformation of heart and mind and soul. Salvation frees us from fear... from fear of death, from fear of failure, from fear of rejection, from fear of others. Salvation assures us we are loved unconditionally. A Savior is born for you.

Salvation saves us from guilt. We've all done things which we should not to have done, and left undone, things which we should have done. When we're at our most honest we can confess that we have failed to love our neighbors and respond the cry of the needy. We need a Savior to help us.

Salvation is release from self-centeredness. Life is not about you. It is not about me. Life is about loving God and serving others. Some of us are searching for happiness when what we need is holiness. Eugene Peterson wrote, "Centering life in the insatiable demands of the ego is a sure path to doom. Life confined to self is a prison; a joy-killing, neurosis-producing, disease-fomenting prison." But thank God almighty, a Savior is born for you. Maybe it's time we prayed with King David. "Restore to me the joy of my salvation." (Psalm 51:12)

JOY TO THE WORLD, OUR TROUBLES ARE LIMITED!

Joy is not a product of possessions, pleasure, busyness, affluence, or accomplishment. Joy is the experience of knowing that nothing, not sickness, failure, famine, war, or even death can separate us from the love of Christ. (Romans 8:38)

Paul told the Philippian Christians, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice." (Philippians 4:4) He wrote that from a Roman prison while waiting execution. This old soldier of the Cross who had been ridiculed, shipwrecked, flogged and abandoned, refused to let the circumstances of life destroy the joy he found in serving his Lord.

Joy is a choice we make. Life can make us bitter or it can make us better. It can leave us grumbling or make us grateful. We decide what we will do with what is.

Joy is a hope we embrace. Every problem has a life span. No trouble enjoys everlasting life. Things may not get better, they may even get worse, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory. For in all things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us.

Joy is a presence we encounter. As the German theologian, Moltmann put it, "God weeps with us so that one day we may laugh with Him."

JOY TO THE WORLD, TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL!

When Jesus was on trial for blasphemy, Pontius Pilate posed this question. What is Truth? That question has never been more hotly debated than now. For some, truth is relative; you've got your truth, I've got mine. We ought not to speak in terms of absolutes. For others, truth is a narrow-minded opinion. I have the truth and others are missing it. For still others, truth is inconvenient. In a world culture of lies, spins, half-truths, and never-confess-unless-you-get-caught, can we trust anybody to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—even under oath in a court of law?

Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, and are really My disciples, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." (John 8:31-32). Truth matters. As long as we continue to know nothing definite about God we are free to be the captains of our fate and the masters of our soul. But we do know something definite about God. God is love. God is just. God is merciful. God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. So, let us live truthful lives. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them with truth." Let us walk in the light of Christ. Let us live in full disclosure. Let us speak the right truth, at the right time, in the right way, to the right person, for the right reason, so help us God.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! The Savior reigns! Our troubles are limited! And truth shall prevail! In a world that could use a little good news, maybe it's time for Christians to repeat the sounding joy.