

3 Advent – 13 December 2009 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Zephaniah 3:14-20 • Canticle 9 (First Song of Isaiah) • Philippians 4:4-7 • Luke 3:7-18
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The reward for getting to the third week of Advent—is a pink candle and the subject of “joy.” Christians are not the only ones thinking about joy in our lives. Earlier this year, BMW undertook a new marketing campaign to revolve around the word “joy.” Joy is intrinsic, they say. You just can’t help it; you have to jump for joy. I think they have confused joy and happiness. “Happiness is a response to [some] circumstance, joy” is deeper than that and “is [based on an abiding] confidence built upon relationship.” [John MacArthur] If life is a river and happiness is dancing white-caps on the surface of water, joy is a slow, deep under-current. As outlined by BMW, their new brand identity focuses on the theme of joy with two priorities: efficiency and aesthetics. As we reflect on joy this morning, my two priorities are cultivation and endurance.

In the Christian church, we anticipate a joyful Christmas, but rarely consider the joy of waiting. Sounds like a bit of an oxymoron. Joy is a challenge because it can’t be grasped and held. I don’t believe in BMW’s marketing model; joy can’t be manufactured or forced or purchased, but is discovered instead. So today I would like to consider three challenging truths about joy and to reflect on cultivating an internal landscape that will be able to recognize and nurture it, whenever it appears.

The first challenge of joy is that it is deeply connected to patience. Whether we have been able to embrace the spiritual waiting of Advent or whether we have been just too busy, we can’t make December go by any slower to give ourselves more time. And

for those of us anticipating the festivities, we can't make Christmas come any faster either. Patience is always a watchword during Advent because Advent has many distractions.

Our forebear in the faith, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, wrote in the year 258 “Patient waiting is necessary if we are to be perfected in what we have begun to be, and if we are to receive from God what we hope for and believe.”[On the Value of Patience] Hope demands patience. And if we hope for joy, we can expect to have to wait for it patiently. But waiting, even patient waiting, is active; it is about being *and* doing.

Paul's advice to the Philippians that we heard this morning was about what they could do while they were waiting for Christ to come again. Paul connected the dots between rejoicing, prayer and peace. Rejoicing is active. It is that which we can do to cultivate joy, even though it may not be easy. Remember to be thankful, he said; give glory to God. Remember that any spiritual “way of being” takes practice and patience.

When Paul said, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” I hope he was including being gentle with ourselves. Patience implies that the goal will not be immediate and the path might not always be smooth. But God's peace is said to guard our hearts and minds from the curse of worry. Peace is a soft soil where joy can be found because the rocks of distraction and anxiety have been patiently removed.

The second challenge of joy is that it requires endurance. John the Baptizer had a message so powerful that crowds flocked to the desert to see and hear him. The tone of his message as recorded by Luke sounds very harsh. John's joy cannot be confused with

happiness. He knew he was delivering God’s message and he knew that the kingdom was very near. His joy was in Jesus. And what about the crowds? Luke writes that the people were “filled with expectation,” wondering whether John might be the Messiah. John’s words were not a feel-good message and seemed hard to take in. The crowd’s response—“What should we do?”—is the same as ours, whenever we are confronted by a serious situation. We want to *do* something.

John’s answer was not really about how to treat other people, but his answer was that joy cannot be found in possessions *and* that it matters. Our relationship to our money and our goods is a matter of justice. John made clear that our relationship to God cannot exist in one box, with our relationship to what we possess partitioned off into another. Above all else, John was a pivotal figure in the story of God’s relationship to human beings. John began a seismic shift by connecting the old with the new. In the scene described in today’s reading, he emphasized the ancient imagery of the fire of God’s judgment, while re-orienting the expectations of the people *and* it was proclaimed as good news! The one who was to come would lead in a new way. And the way was self-giving love.

When Paul described love to the Christians in Corinth he said that love is patient *and* that love endures all things. The way of love *is* the way of joy. We must be steadfast in loving God and one another. Joy will be found in those relationships.

The third challenge of joy is that it is fragile. Joy can easily be encroached upon and crushed. The prophet Zephaniah named several destroyers of joy, among them fear,

reproach, oppression, and shame. Like John’s crowds, we ask the question “What can we do?” Be exuberant, Zephaniah wrote. “Sing aloud...shout...rejoice and exult with all your heart.” Exuberance is joy in action. Do it. But be gentle with yourself by keeping joyful people around you. Be careful about whether people are encouraging or discouraging you. Cultivate worthwhile pursuits. And don’t be afraid to share your enthusiasm. Joy is found in relationship.

We often equate fragile with valuable. We afford fragile things special care and protection. The Post Office has big stickers with red letters that say “Fragile.” Perhaps you know the phrase “shield the joyous” from one of the Collects at Compline. [Collects for Compline, BCP p. 134] It may seem like an odd request, but in moments of joy, we are uniquely vulnerable and joy is worth protecting.

I close with this story that I heard recently. There were two men who were sharing a hospital room. One man, whose bed was next to the window, was allowed to sit up for one hour each day. His roommate was unable to sit up at all. Both men were seriously ill and were in the hospital for a long time.

Each day, when the man near the window sat up, he described what he saw in great detail so his roommate could picture it all. He talked about the flowers and the people. There was a pond with ducks and a swing set where children played. Over the course of weeks, the other man began to look forward to that hour so much; it was the high point of each day. He was so grateful for the kindness of the descriptions that he

became an encouragement to the man by the window. Sadly, one night the man by the window died in his sleep and the daily “journeys outside” came to an end.

The good news was that the other was now given the opportunity to move over to the bed by the window. The first day, he asked to be propped up to be able to see out of the window just once. And what he saw was a blank wall on the building next door. In surprise, he mentioned this to the nurse, and told of all that the other man had described. The nurse let him know that his roommate had been blind.

Both of these men were fragile in their own ways. Each encouraged the other; each brought joy to the other. Each could have kept to himself, dwelling on his own difficulty. Each reached out in loving-kindness to the other, and it appeared across the room as joy.

As we continue to wait during Advent, Joy is also waiting—waiting to be sought after, waiting to be discovered, waiting to appear to you. Rejoice, the Lord is near.

Amen.