

FIRST LESSON: Zephaniah 3:14-20
SECOND LESSON: Philippians 4:4-7
THE GOSPEL: Luke 3:7-18

Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018

“Joy”

Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
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Grace, peace, hope, love be to you now through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

It's a fun challenge to give new pastors this text in which to preach. Luke Chapter 3 starts off with a bang. John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers...” Preach on that. Thankfully I have been around for a little bit now and so I have some perspective on this. My hope that the message of joy resonates in your life on this third Sunday in Advent.

Sometimes I feel like John is my seventh grade football coach, and if you've not had that experience, seventh grade football coaches are sent by God to break you open, and they do it through a series of word patterns and a series of drills. I never did serve in the military, but for you who have done boot camp, maybe a similar and more powerful experience. This statement “to break us open”, John was a man of repentance, asking people to change, to turn around.

So this message that comes, I hope I can say it to you in these ways, that this message of what is important is the love of God and the joy that comes. Joy is so much more than happiness. You remember the Bobby McFerrin song, *Don't worry be happy*. Those words, happy relates to the word happenstance which relates to how things are going. How are things going in your life? It is easier to be happy when things are going well, but joy is a word that describes relationship, relating to God, relating to the Good News, it's a deeper word. Yes, it is not a constant because of the grief that we have in life, the mourning we have in life, but it is a description of a deep relationship, that's where joy has its incredible meaning and purpose.

These crowds were asking John when he gave this Gospel message, this beautiful question “What then should we do?” This understanding of sharing was certainly at the top, two coats – give one away. You have food? Share. This phrase, “even tax collectors”, and you know they were hated because they took money from the people to feed the Roman system. Often a tax collector could be entrepreneurial and shake people down for even

more money. So they were a curse. So this phrase “even tax collectors” came to be baptized, and they asked “Teacher, what should we do?” John’s comment was, “Do not collect any more than what you should.” I think this is touching, soldiers, occupiers, members of the Roman Empire Legion, even they were coming to ask what they should do, and this understanding, “Don’t extort, don’t threat, don’t make false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages.” Everyone was filled with these expectations.

I ask you, as we are in this season of apocalyptic or understanding of Christ’s coming again, is that each one of us has a mission field, a mission area. Here they were described for people in their life and for tax collectors and for soldiers, but you and I, we have mission fields, sometimes I have heard it called this way, the sphere of influence. Many of us can worry about things beyond our control, but this is an encouragement for you and I to focus upon what God has given us as our righteous mission field, our area. Often that’s our families of course, that’s the places in which we live, retirement communities, or in your community, it’s certainly within this church, our mission field and the way that we can support and continue to proclaim and invite and bless. Way too much worry comes when we work outside of our God given mission field. So that’s my encouragement here.

The word “viper”, none of us here are vipers. That’s a word to wake us up, vipers are reactionary. You know a little bit about snakes, cold blooded, don’t generate their heat, they are reactive to what the environment is. We are called as people to be proactive, to take this message of repentance, of hope and peace, and yes, joy into the world. I do ask this for you. Joy is such a beautiful word.

Psalms 30 is often used in pastoral care, weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. I love that because it honors the depth of emotion that people have in the times of grief and dismay, but comes with the sign of hope, the joy, the lingering with the Lord is a certainty. In John 15, the word joy is used again. Jesus said it this way, “My Father has loved me and I have loved you, so abide in my love. If you keep my commandments to love one another, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” This beautiful phrase, I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

I say it to you in this simple way – Jesus is delighted in you, Jesus has joy in knowing you, it is his joy that pervades our life so that our joy may be complete. Joy is this beautiful reception of God’s love. The love and joy of Christ in your life, it is so amazing. It is a way to be blessed, the Greek word makarios, it is a way to be blessed, this joy of relating to God is a beautiful relationship word.

This breaking down the ego that it would be a modern way to describe what John was doing, I wanted to make sure that I talked about this. As he was talking about the winnowing fork that was in his hand, to clear the threshing floor, gather the wheat in his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Sometimes I meet people who feel like they are chaff. I want to say to you – none of us here, none in the world, are chaff. I take the word chaff so that light husk stuff that has to be taken out so that the seed can be used, it's the stuff that needs to float away. If you have ever seen that way of throwing things up so the wind takes away the chaff. To me the chaff is our cares, our concerns, it's the things that weigh us down, that needs to be blown away. We aren't the chaff, it is our cares and concerns of this world.

I wanted to conclude the message with the Philippians text that speaks such powerful words. So much stronger than “don't worry, be happy”, but it says it this way. Rejoice, and again I say to you **rejoice**, do not worry about anything. Certainly in the scripture it talks about tomorrow, because there are enough worries for today. Do not worry about anything.

I loved working with young people, because I would always quiz them. I said, “what does anything mean?” And I say it to you, anything means – anything. It is one of the beautiful words in Scripture, do not worry about anything. Let's do a quick audit – did anybody worry this past week? It says here clearly in the Scripture – oh you brood of vipers. Wait, I'm in that brood. I was worried about health and trying to find a new doctor. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication. So prayer is time with God, supplications are very specific prayer requests. With thanksgiving knowing that God's love and joy is with you, let your requests be known and be made known to God, and the peace with God surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I do ask this, this will be a little bit of John-style, is that this word worry – it is so endemic. Our son Joe has stayed here now and he will be leaving on Tuesday. It's just been great to be with him. He's a very very social engineer. Very analytical, but I just love talking to him about so many things. As a 23-year-old he is learning some amazing things. He had a book that he was reading. It was about cognitive distortions. The things that we do to distort reality. They are all learned over the years that we have. But let's just see if any of these are familiar.

Here's a checklist – all or nothing thinking. You look at things in absolute black and white. It's either fully in or fully out. Or you over generalize. One event is generalized to a never ending pattern of defeat or you discount the positives if somebody says something to you and you discount it, saying well it really doesn't count. Or jumping to conclusions – you

can mind read, you don't even need to ask somebody what they are thinking, you already know what they are thinking. You have fortune telling abilities where you can predict how things are going to turn out without even understanding all the complexities of life. A couple more. You magnify or minimize – either blow things way out of proportion, or you shrink their importance inappropriately. You criticize people with should, musts or oughts, or have to's. Certainly we do that for ourselves – should, must and ought and have to's are important ways to motivate, but they can be very distorted when we forget the joy of the Lord that the joy may be in us and our joy may be complete. Last but not least is – personalization and taking blame. You let people label you or you label yourself.

It was fun talking to Joe about these things, because those are distortions, they create worry. This is not a class on how to get rid of those, you need people who love you, to help gently guide you. You need counsellors in your life or pastors or loving family members or dear friends to be able to take the distortion of life and return it back to this simple, beautiful phrase – do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God. That is my repentance theme to you.

To take the joy of the Lord and to remove these distortions and to fully experience this peace of God which is the most beautiful gift of all. Surpassing any of our understandings and guarding our hearts and minds in Christ. So the repentance that each one of us needs is to see more clearly the joy the Lord has for us. Jesus said these things so that our joy may be in ourselves, hearing this love of God, and this is the joy that lasts. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. Take this joy into your mission field, take this joy out into this third and fourth week of Advent, take this joy and let it be known. Jesus Christ loves. Amen