

December 14th: The Promise of Joy

My friends, welcome to our Advent series called God With Us: Advent Promises for a Just World. This month we're using a resource developed by the UMC General Commission on Religion & Race, a body that aims to help churches navigate complex questions related to racism, discrimination, poverty, and other forms of injustice that are part of our cultural fabric. As we move through the Advent story, and wait with anticipation for the arrival of Jesus, we acknowledge that he is coming to a broken and divided world.

Before we take a closer look at the promise of joy, please take a minute and pray with me.

God of Joy, it is hard to imagine feeling joyful when we are surrounded by so much pain and suffering. It is hard to feel joyful when we know that our friends and family members are dealing with difficult circumstances, health issues, and uncertainties for the future. It is hard to experience joy for ourselves when anxieties fill our days and our to-do lists overwhelm us. But you promise us joy—deep, boundless, uplifting joy. In this time of reflection and worship together, may we open our hearts to this divine promise, may we at least consider the possibility that joy is waiting for us this season. As we learn more about what it means to be people of joy, help us navigate our own situations and emotions with patience and compassion, so that we can help others cultivate the same. Amen.

Sometimes when I have a free afternoon, I like to wander the boardwalk of Alki Beach in West Seattle, listening to the calming sounds of the waves and watching ferries travel back and forth across the water. In the winter I mostly stick to the walking path, but when the weather warms up, I take off my shoes and let my feet sink into the soft sand along the shoreline. As I wander and relax, I will occasionally scan the shore for treasure—pretty little shells, fun looking rocks, and if I'm really lucky, a piece or two of colorful seaglass. It reminds me of my childhood summers, spent on the beaches of Cape Cod, or family trips to the Jersey Shore, when I could spend all day searching for these tiny gifts and adding them to my collection.

This week, I desperately was longing for some time to relax at the beach, but the crazy winds and constant rain kept me away. Still, I thought about searching for seaglass, and even that mental exercise helped a little bit with my current stress levels and anxieties about this season. And the more I thought about it, the more that I realized that seaglass might have something important to teach us this Advent, especially in light of today's text. We'll get to that in a minute, but first let's learn a little bit more about our biblical context.

This morning, our worship takes us back to the Old Testament, to the writings of a little known prophet named Zephaniah. Zephaniah is one of the minor prophets that are often grouped together in Jewish literature as "The Book of the Twelve," but just because he often gets lumped in with other voices doesn't mean that he doesn't have something important to say. So if you've never heard of Zephaniah before, or you want to dig in deeper, you can open up your Old Testament and read along as we learn what this prophet has to say to us. I'll give you a few seconds to find him, he's located between his fellow prophets Habbakuk and Haggai.

Right off the bat, we see that Zephaniah isn't like other prophets who write long speeches, he's actually a poet, composing his music and lyrics during the 7th century reign of King Josiah in the southern kingdom of Judah. Zephaniah is writing in Jerusalem, the very center of Jewish life and culture, but he's not happy with what he's observing. Despite the good that had been done by King Josiah, he's seeing that other leaders are not doing what was right, and like his contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, who we heard from two weeks ago, Zephaniah speaks out against moral and spiritual corruption, the worship of idols like Baal, and a widening gap between the richest and poorest citizens of the land. While some of the religious and social elite lived in relative luxury inside the city walls, many of Judah's citizens lived in poverty in the hill towns and villages that did not have the same level of physical protection or material wealth. They were vulnerable: open to attacks by invading Babylonians, susceptible to regular famine and drought, and left to fend for themselves while their neighbors partied away in the capital.

And like Jeremiah's prophecies of doom and gloom, Zephaniah does his fair share of proclaiming the future destruction of Jerusalem. Over the course of his first two chapters, he warns, sometimes in explicit detail, that this intense stratification of society is not what God had intended for his people. He calls out their greed and promises that their selfish actions will not go unpunished. In chapter 1 verses 10 and 11, he writes, "On that day," declares the LORD, "a cry will go up from the Fish Gate, wailing from the New Quarter, and a loud crash from the hills. Wail, you who live in the market district; all your merchants will be wiped out, all who trade with silver will be destroyed." In addition to this crying and wailing, Zephaniah tells the priests and kings that woe is coming to them. At the start of chapter 3, he says these harsh words to them, "Woe to you, woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled!"

I don't know about you, but wailing and woe is not necessarily what I think of when I imagine a passage about joy, am I right? It's not really the kind of text you would expect to include in the season of Advent, is it? Probably not.

But there is a reason that Zephaniah proclaims this woe and punishment to the people of Judah—he's not just doing this for fun. As a prophetic voice, he is standing with the oppressed people of his time and he sees their distress, he witnesses their pain and suffering. And he knows that there are some people for whom the downfall of the powerful will be good news. So in the very last part of Zephaniah's writings, he includes this final reflection, what biblical scholars call his "song of joy." In the NIV translation, we get an added heading prior to these verses which reads, "the restoration of Israel's remnant." So when we put those two descriptions together, we see that Zephaniah's prophetic poetry isn't just focused on taking down Judah's enemies, but about building back up the faithful people who will remain. Yes, doom and gloom is coming, but so is something else: safety and healing.

Zephaniah says that his nation will be fractured, but out of that fracture comes something new, something good. He prophesies that things will be broken, but that brokenness doesn't have the final say, because there will be a remnant of people who will not only survive, but be given the opportunity to thrive.

Zephaniah says that a radical destruction of the world order could mean a chance to reconstruct our culture and institutions—but this time with equity and compassion in mind. And this is Zephaniah’s vision for God’s people—he sings for them a better way, a more inclusive, ethical, and just future.

If you’re reading along in your Bible, let’s take a closer look at this song of joy. Starting in verse 9, Zephaniah gives instructions for what it will look like for this remnant—he sings, “Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings.” Later, in verse 14, he continues, “Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.”

Here’s what I love about this image of God’s joyful people:

When Zephaniah describes this future remnant, he gives us this picture of solidarity rather than stratification. He says that this new people group won’t be divided between rich and poor, city and village, because God’s people will stand shoulder to shoulder with each other. This remnant of people will be bodily and spiritually aligned, brought together by the act of common worship. It’s an image of wholeness too, because the individuals and families who had been scattered will join together in community to share offerings. And this results in a collective response of joy—all voices are brought into shouts and songs. It’s an image of equity, and it’s an image of peace—there are no reasons to be afraid, and there is nothing that can cause harm.

This holiday season, I think our world needs to hear both Zephaniah’s prophetic condemnation and his words of hope.

I think our world of billionaires needs to hear that the growing gap between the rich and the poor will bring about destruction. Maybe not immediately, but

eventually all of this will come crashing down—and it won't be pretty when it does.

I think our culture of excess and overconsumption needs to be reminded that many of our neighbors are struggling to get by. As we look around at the impact of the recent government shutdown, the rising cost of living, and the devastating loss from last week's floods, we cannot ignore that many are still so so so vulnerable.

I think our national and local leaders need to listen to the righteous frustration of the people living on the margins of our society. The downtrodden and disenfranchised have something important to say to us about our collective priorities and vision for the future!

I think we all need to remember that stratification and hierarchy are not God's intended design for humanity, and there is a better way for us to live and care for each other. If we are going to be the Church, it is our job to invite people into this new reality, we have to lead the way. We have to show them what it looks like to stand shoulder to shoulder with each other, and how powerful it can be to join together.

And I think we need to heed this ancient call to joy—we need this kind of prophetic vision now more than ever. Zephaniah tells us of a joy that cannot be taken away from us, because it is a joy that resides inside of us. It is a joy that hopes for a better future, and trusts that one day, things will be made right.

But finding joy, right here and right now in our current system and struggle is a difficult task, I know. Even if we search for it, it can be tough to hold onto.

If you are experiencing hardship, uncertainty, or grief during this Advent season, you are not alone, and you are not forgotten by God. Like in biblical times, God sees the pain and suffering of God's people—it does not go unnoticed. If you go home and read Zephaniah for yourself this week, you might discover that your own feelings and realities are there waiting for you in our text, you might see how this ancient story echoes into the present. Reading this poetry might remind you that you are seen and heard.

If you're feeling the full weight of recent tragedies and crises, don't feel pressured to give into what I'm going to call manufactured or artificial joy—you know, the kind of temporary dopamine boost you might feel when purchasing something new and shiny, or the forced happiness you might put on like a mask when celebrating with family and friends. You don't have to paper over your true feelings with pretty ribbons and big red bows, you can acknowledge that things feel heavy—Zephaniah shows us that honesty is a necessary part of joy too.

But here's where I'm going to remind us about seaglass.

Seaglass is evidence that something has broken into many pieces, it's proof that at one point, something was utterly destroyed. Something crashed against the waves and splintered. What used to be didn't exist any longer.

And still, out of all that fracture and turmoil, something beautiful was made. A shard of seaglass on the beach is a remnant, a tiny fragment that has been made smooth and into a treasure. It survived and landed at our feet, ready to be picked up and held in our hands. And now, it shows us that not everything that is broken is worthless, not everything that has been torn apart is hopeless. Sometimes, that's where something new and transformative comes into being. That's where what has been left behind turns into something precious.

My friends, I know that many of you probably won't have a chance to make it to a beach this week, but I'm still going to invite you to join me in a mental exercise of searching for seaglass. If there's something broken in your life, or if you're dealing with something painful, my prayer for you this week is that God gives you a remnant—a tiny shard, a seeming fragment, enough treasure to carry you through this difficult season. I hope that this remnant, whatever it is, becomes a source of joy—deep, abiding, lasting joy that will keep you going until the day when we can stand shoulder to shoulder and sing together. May this joy embolden us to live into solidarity and reject stratification.

This is what God has promised us through the music of our prophet, and this is the song that I know will remain in each of our hearts until Jesus returns to us.

As we wait for Jesus together, let us wait in joy.

Amen.