

Advent & Christmas 2015: “Cross My Heart”
Promised Joy(ish)
Message on Zephaniah 3:14-20 & Philippians 4:4-7 (12/12 & 12/13/15)
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Earlier this week, I was eating dinner at a local restaurant. Where I was sitting, I could see out through the restaurant's big, front windows – and something caught my eye in the windows of one of the businesses across the street.

Setting in the windows across the street were two lighted signs, each with a single word depicted: one was the word “Joy” and the other was the word “Wish.” Very appropriate for the season.

However, because of the where and how I was sitting, and because there was a window beam partially covering my view of one of those word signs, what I saw was a bit...incomplete.

The sign depicting the word “Joy” was fully visible from where I was sitting. Unfortunately, though I could see what word it was *supposed* to be, thanks to the window beam in my way, the word “Wish” appeared to be missing its “w.”

So, what I actually saw was “Joy” and “ish.” “Joy...ish.” It made me chuckle at first. But, then I thought about the hard truth contained in this funny, little visual I had encountered.

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These days, it's fairly common for people to casually add “ish” to the end of a word in order to diminish the reality of the word in question. So, for example, a person might say, “I'm feeling betterish” if they'd been sick and had not really improved all that much.

Or, if they wanted to communicate that they didn't feel very confident about a job interview, someone might say, “The interview went wellish.”

This is not the most high-class way of speaking...but, as I said, it's fairly common these days. And I myself am known to do it on occasion.

When I saw “Joy...ish” depicted on the signs across the street from me earlier this week, it made me think about how that's precisely the way many people feel this time of year: they understand they are *supposed to* feel joyful – and they may experience moments of joy – but their general mood could not be described as fully joyful. They feel joy...ish.

Or, maybe their general mood is sadness...fear...anger – and even their rare, lighter moments could only be described as “joyish.”

Perhaps you know what I'm talking about. Perhaps you have experienced a holiday season like this. Perhaps you are experiencing one right now. I know I have. Many times.

Despite the fact that I always have lots of great people in my life thanks to the wonderful work I get to do, I have frequently spent the month of December feeling quite lonely.

Until recently, I had nearly always been single this time of year...I haven't lived where my family lives in well over a decade...and my closest friends have also often been hours away.

At a time of year when our culture emphasizes the importance of spending time with friends, family, and your closest loved ones, I have often struggled...because spending time with those people has usually been next to impossible for me – at least until Advent and Christmas are over and we pastors can take a bit of a breather!

Two years ago, I had a particularly lonely Advent season and so was eagerly awaiting a Christmas Day flight to Arizona where I would be meeting my family to spend a week of vacation.

I was living in Wahpeton at the time, so my flight was to leave from Fargo early Christmas morning. Unfortunately, however, nasty weather elsewhere got my flight cancelled and I was automatically rebooked onto a flight that wouldn't leave until two days *after* Christmas. It's possible I almost had a nervous breakdown when I learned this – and I learned it at about 10:30 Christmas Eve night...*after* our busy Christmas Eve worship service, *after* dinner with church members, and *after* I'd already driven to Fargo to stay overnight in preparation for my early morning flight. I was devastated.

But, there was no way I was going to miss out on two days with my family...especially when I had been feeling so lonely and was in such desperate need of good, quality time with them! So, after a very good, late-night Christmas Eve cry, I resolved to figure out a better alternative – something that *would* get me to Arizona, and to my family, on Christmas Day. No matter what.

I then had a conversation with a very helpful airline customer service worker, I got booked onto a flight out of Minneapolis Christmas morning and ended up arriving in Tucson right around the time I would have arrived had I been able to use my original itinerary.

It was not ideal – and it was rather risky because I had to drive through the night from Fargo to Minneapolis, by myself, on roads that were not in the best of winter weather conditions. But I was as careful as I could be and I was so determined to get to my family. I needed them more than ever that particular Christmas. //

This time of year has also often been challenging for me because of its strong focus on children. I have always expected I'd have children of my own someday, but, as the years have gone by, that expectation has had to shift somewhat.

While I certainly hope children *are* in my future, you just never know. So, for me, this season has often brought with it a sense of melancholy for *that* reason, too...and I'm guessing I'm not alone in that particular kind of holiday sadness.

During Advent, we celebrate the children among us – wonderfully so, of course – and, during Advent, we wait expectantly for a *baby* to be born in our midst. So, for all who have hoped for a baby of their own, this time of year can bring a sense of painful longing to the surface – perhaps felt a bit more deeply during *this* season than during other seasons.

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Historically, the 3rd week of Advent has brought with it a particular focus on *joy*. As I mentioned in last week's sermon, when Advent first became a season in the church year, it was designed to function much like the church season of Lent.

Both Advent and Lent are seasons of preparation that lead up to a high holy day in the life of the church: Advent leads up to Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' birth...and Lent leads up to Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

For Christians, Christmas and Easter are arguably the most important, most joyful holidays – *holy days* – of the year...and days that are of great importance require great preparation and great reflection.

Advent and Lent were originally designed to be just such seasons: weeks of preparation filled with somber reflection and repentance – times for getting your heart and life “right” with God and neighbor so you could fully celebrate the holy day to come. We still maintain some semblance of this during the season of Lent, but very little of it remains during Advent.

Though we may seek to add some reflective, devotional practices in the weeks leading up to Christmas, for the most part, during Advent, we aim to create a more positive vibe than that of Lent. Yet there is a fringe of the old, historic Advent that remains.

Just as during the season of Lent, many churches use purple as the primary color for Advent. Purple is meant to symbolize confession and repentance...it is meant to have a more somber feel than other colors. A month's worth of deep purple during Advent was meant to contrast sharply with the bright white of Christmas.

Yet, because of the joyous holiday to come, Christians centuries ago decided there

should be *some* brightness within Advent – there should be some reprieve from the deep purple.

So they gave the 3rd Sunday of Advent a *rose* – or pink – color. A little something lighter for the middle of the somber season. Thus, the 3rd Sunday of Advent became the Sunday of *joy*.

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If you've been here – and have paid careful attention – the last two weeks, you may have noticed that today's Scripture readings have a different sort of feel to them than the last two weeks' readings have had.

The first weekend of Advent, we heard about “strange things happening to the sun, moon, and stars”...nations being afraid because of roaring seas – all as signs of Jesus' immanent return for a time of final judgment and global restoration.

Last weekend, Advent 2 brought us John the Baptist with his often harsh words to the crowds – words about preparing the way of the Lord and about living life differently, more generously...living with compassion and conviction.

The readings for Advent 1 and 2 had a weight to them that today's readings do not seem to have. If anything, today's readings desire to *lift* any weight that is oppressing their hearers.

Our reading from the prophet Zephaniah said, “Everyone in Jerusalem and Judah, celebrate and shout with all your heart! ... The Lord your God...will refresh your life with his love.’ The Lord has promised: Your sorrow has ended, and you can celebrate ... I will lead you home, and with your own eyes you will see me bless you.”

Then, Philippians 4 brought us these words: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

The words of these readings are so perfect for a seasonal focus on *joy*.

“Celebrate and shout with all your heart,” Zephaniah wrote. “The Lord your God...will refresh your life with his love.’ The Lord has promised: Your sorrow has ended, and you can celebrate.” And from St. Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ... The Lord is near.”

“Celebrate and shout with all your heart.” “Your sorrow has ended.” “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Important *words* from God's own Word, the Holy Bible.

But what if you don't *feel* like celebrating and shouting with all your heart? What if your sorrow *has not* ended? What if you can barely muster up “joy...ish,” let alone the ability to rejoice always?

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I was reminded this week of a blog post from a couple of years ago by a Christian missionary named Jamie. The post was called “The Fall of Christmas” and she began it by detailing the dramatic way in which her family Christmas tree had recently fallen...crashing loudly and breaking many cherished ornaments in the process.

At the time she wrote this particular post, Jamie was in a season of grief over a personal loss (as were some of her loved ones), so the falling of their Christmas tree seemed a bit too on-the-nose...as though the falling of their tree and its destruction symbolized the awful way so many feel around Christmastime. Though I will not read you the entire post, the second half is so beautiful and perfect. She wrote this:

“There are a lot of people for whom this time of year is sad or bitter, hollow or lonely, or just plain painful. While some of us are celebrating, others are aching. While some of us are toasting to long life, others are mourning life lost. While some of us feast on family time, others are starving to be loved.

“The bustle of activity and togetherness in December only serves to make some houses feel all the more empty. Loneliness is the quiet enemy of Joy.

“When my Christmas tree fell, it was like Christmas fell with it. The surviving ornaments stayed in a pile on the floor, and the tree, now wrenched upright and properly secured, sat untouched with bare spots and bushy places and branches all tweaked out of order. Ugly. It was ugly and sad, and it felt just like Christmas to me... it felt right.

“So I left it like that until yesterday, when I decided it was too depressing to look at anymore and I set about fluffing and fixing it, rearranging it, and putting it back together. It will never return to its former glory, that is certain.

“This poor tree is just gonna have to be a little shabby and a little wonky and a little bit lonely looking with so few ornaments left on it this year. But, to be honest, it warmed my own shabby, crooked soul to see it there, waiting for me this morning.

“That dinged and droopy star calling my name, whispering a truth that I needed badly to remember...Jesus didn't come to fix it all. He came to be *with us in it all*. *Immanuel*. God with us.

“Blessed are the poor, the mourning, the meek, and the hungry... for The Lord is with

us. Merry sad Christmas, Beloved. *You. Are Not. Alone.*"¹

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So many among us have good reasons not to feel like celebrating or shouting with all their hearts. So many among us continue to feel deep sorrow over life circumstances. So many among us can barely muster up "joy...ish," let alone the ability to rejoice always.

Yet...Christmas *is* coming. And Christmas brings with it "glad tidings of great joy."

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So. In this season of *joy*, may we feel surrounded by the presence of our Savior...our Emmanuel, our "God with us." And when the most we can muster is *joyish*, may we trust that full joy *will* come.

We may have to wait a while, but God promises to bless us with joy. The birth of Jesus Christ into this world is the seal of that promise.

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The good news for all of us here today is that we worship a God who keeps promises. "I *will* be with you...and joy *will* come," God said. "Cross my heart." Thanks be to God.

¹ <http://www.theveryworstmissionary.com/2013/12/the-fall-of-christmas.html>