

Such Joy!

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

It's the third Sunday in Advent. We're getting closer to Christmas. It's really only a week away with the 4th Sunday of Advent also being Christmas Eve. I hope you can be with us next Sunday – or in some place where you can worship and celebrate the story. But today, just a little longer, I invite you to remember that Advent is a season of its own. I hope you are not rushing too fast to get to Christmas. It will get here soon enough. And if you rush, you just might miss Christmas altogether. Advent takes time, it takes some practice to live in the darkness and yet still be open to the light that is coming.

On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, I want to introduce you to Zephaniah. I am imagining that most of you don't yet know him. He's one of our relatives. And his story can be found towards the end of the Hebrew Scriptures – in a book by the same name. Zephaniah. It's a very short book. You could read it in 15 minutes or so. But most of us don't wander through the Old Testament very often trying to learn more about our relatives. But you should do it sometimes. It's very enlightening. It's a good gift to give yourself in this time of Advent waiting. Because we are not the first to wait. We are not the first people to be deep in darkness. We are not the first to hope for God to come to us again.

Zephaniah was a prophet during the reign of Josiah – a great king who followed a bad ruler named Manasseh who had ruled for 50 years. Under Manasseh, the heart of the nation crumbles in immorality, in destructive practices, in distortion of truth, in mistreatment of neighbors and neighboring countries. It was a mess – and such a mess cannot be fixed in short order. Not even a good election can do that magic. It takes time.

Zephaniah supported the reform movement of Josiah, the new king. And yet, Zephaniah started out announcing gloom and doom – but what he was saying is this – you have lived through hard times and learned ways of living that do not honor your history or your purpose. You must change in order to find the joy in your own heart and community. God has not abandoned you. It is you yourself who has abandoned you. And if you keep on in this way – you will live your way to utter destruction.

Zephaniah knew what was possible – and he could see a light on the horizon that beckoned all to a new day. Out of the ashes comes not nothingness – but new possibility. Although the darkness is all around us – it will not swallow us up. Joy is in our midst. God is with us. This is what we can learn when we allow ourselves to pay attention during Advent.

It reminds me of a story I recently read - a children's story called The Christmas Miracle of Jonathon Toomey. It's a lovely story, and I recommend it to you. Jonathon was the best woodcarver in all the valley – but he was also the gloomiest person anyone knew. How could a

man of such artistic ability also be a person of such gloominess? Mostly people just kept their distance as he muttered his disapproval of the church bells ringing too often and the children laughing and playing too loudly. The children made fun of him – calling him Mr Gloomy instead of Mr. Toomey.

What the village people did not know was the reason for his gloom. A reason why he walked hunched over, as if carrying a great weight on his shoulders. Some years before, when Jonathon Toomey had been young and so full of life and love, his wife and baby had become very sick. The doctors could not find a way to help them, and the mother and child died three days apart from each other.

Jonathon Toomey had packed his bags and started traveling until his tears stopped. Then he had settled in on the edge of this village community to do his woodcarving. The tears had stopped, but the grief and darkness still owned his heart. He lived out his pain every day. There was no joy. No life. He just went through the motions.

As the story goes, one day, Jonathon Toomey heard a knock at his door – and he muttered and grumbled all the way to the door to see who was there. At the door was a woman and a young boy. They had come to ask the woodcarver to make something for them – a set of wooden carvings that included 2 sheep, a cow, an angel, Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and 3 wise ones. They had just moved to the village – and these carvings had been lost on the way. The woodcarver mutters that he will do the carvings.

The mother and boy come to visit the woodcarver over and over as he works. They are not invited –they never would have been - they just show up – and each time they very politely ask if the boy can watch. The mother brings some baked goods to share as a thank you gift, and in time, they begin to have some tea together. And she sits and knits while the boy watches the woodcarver closely. In time, the boy asks the woodcarver to teach him to carve – and he does. All of this with Jonathon Toomey being grumpy and gloomy. And yet, there is a brightening that begins to take place. He takes a liking to the boy and a gentleness comes out of him.

After they had shared such evenings together several times, and as Christmas was drawing nearer, in fact- it was now Christmas eve - the mother and boy were leaving from a visit when they turned and gave Jonathon Toomey two Christmas gifts. I don't want any presents – said Jonathon Toomey. Well, that's exactly why we are giving them said the mother as she and boy walked off.

Jonathon sat down and slowly opened the gifts. The first was a hand made scarf that the mother had been making while visiting in Jonathon's home these past weeks. The other was an image of a bird, a robin with lopsided wings, crudely carved from pine by the boy who was still learning to carve. It caused the woodcarver to smile just a little bit.

The hardest part of course is for him to carve the figures of Mary and the young Jesus. This takes him to the deep places of his own grief. He had done all the rest of the nativity scene first – with

the help of the boy kindly and respectfully reminding him to make the figures happy and proud – after all, they are their to offer praise to the baby Jesus. Then, with those figures carved and those lessons learned, the woodcarver finally comes to the last two figures - the mother and child. But he can't imagine the carving. He tries to draw it out, but time and again he is frustrated with what he draws. It is Christmas Eve – he is working to finish the nativity set, but he is so stuck in the darkness of his own grief. Finally he takes out a drawing he had started once before – at another time - of another mother and child – the two most dear people in his life – and he slowly begins to shape the wood into the image of a mother and boy from his memories of deepest love – which had an equal depth of grief. He carves through the night until the first light of sun dawns the new day.

The making of the gift has transformed the woodcarver and broken the grip of the darkness on his heart and soul. He is no longer Mr. Gloomy but is now a laughing, joyful spirit. And the gift has transformed a mother and child who had also traveled to this village after losing a loved one in their life. She was a widow, and the boy had lost his father. The stories converge, the connections break forth, and new possibilities grow out of the ashes of brokenness, grief and despair. Pain is healed by new relationship and love. And the community is changed as well. All the villagers can see the difference in this man who was once grumpy but is now joyful and kind.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the darkness. The darkness of grief. The darkness of anxiety. Of financial need or ruin. Of broken places that seem impossible to heal. Of mistakes that seem to now define our lives. You know what I am talking about. You have your own story that you can tell. You know your own dark places of the soul. You know.

And it is hard to trust again once we have been hurt. Hard to trust another person. Hard to trust our own judgment. Hard to trust church when we've been hurt by churches in the past. Hard to trust our country and our leaders who sometimes make decisions to separate us from the rest of the world instead of helping us join with the rest of the world's people. You know it is hard to trust once you have hurt in the deepest places of the soul.

Zephaniah knew that the people of Israel needed help moving beyond their fear and pain of the past. He knew of such things. He was of mixed ancestry and he was a foreigner who had traveled in different places. He did not represent the purity of one people in a homogenous culture – but the mixed up wonderful mess of all of God's people trying to live together. We don't know much about him – but we know his name in Hebrew means God protects or treasures. I imagine that his story was one that also knew the pain and grief of hard times and darkness. How else can one lead a people from gloom and doom to the light of new day? He knew. He knew how hard it was to let go of the pain and trust that it could be healed. He knew. He also knew that if the people did not let go, they would allow the power of darkness and mistrust and hatred and fear to rule their lives just as King Manasseh had done for so long.

So Zephaniah began by talking about doom – and he was saying – you can let it rule your life, or you can open yourself to the One who is coming, and indeed, is already with us. Do you see the

light at the edge of day. Do you see the light of the coals in the fire that has burned so long and has now died down – it can be brought back to full flame. It's up to you. God has not abandoned you. God is calling you home. Bring your pain with you. Bring your hurt. Bring your fear. Come and open yourself to the One who comes to restore and bring new life. The Holy One does not come to kill or punish – but to commute our sentence and bring us to restoration and joy.

And it is not just a personal thing for Zephaniah. He is calling for the soul of a nation to wake up. If the people will connect, if the people will remember that the power of violence effects everyone, but so does the power of love and grace. We have the power to commute the sentences that have been handed down that harden the hearts and hide the joy. We have the power if we will live the joy of our own hearts. We must not yield the joy. We must share it, trust it, let it grow.

The One who is coming is already with us. And is coming again and more and we have the opportunity out of the ashes of our own struggles to bring forth not just desolation, but to build something new. There has been enough suffering. The prophets are always right that there will be suffering. We know it first hand. But now it is time to carve our way through the long night and find our heart again. It is time to dance and sing with the God who is our partner and our lover. It is time for deep joy to lead us home. It is time for love to heal our hearts.

This is a homecoming text. Come home to who you are. Come home to what you know and love. Come home to your heart and find the joy that still is within you. And is between us. Come home. Don't let someone else take your life away. Don't give away your power. Come home. Be who you are created to be. Let your joy lead you.

Having a foreigner bring the word of God home to a people who have forgotten who they are has the power of God's word transcending the language or the imbedded cultural norms. God's joy can not be contained by one way or one expression. So these words by Desmond Tutu help us get at the power of the word coming from outside of our own experience. He says:

“Africans believe in something that is difficult to render in English. ... It means the essence of being human....In our African language we say “a person is a person through other persons.” I would not know how to be a human being at all except I learn this from other human beings. We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence. We are meant to compliment each other. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental law of our being. Not even the most powerful nation can be completely self-sufficient.”

We soon will be at Christmas. Remember. It's not a past event. It is the celebration of joy in our midst today. God is coming again. To wake us up. To give us more courage. To fill us with love. To give us back to each other. Be watching. This is a time to come home and know the joy. Amen.