Sermon on Advent 3C

**Longing for Home**
(Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; John 3:7-18)

I want to share some really good news with you today: you can be a joyful person! In fact it’s not as difficult as it might first appear! Does that annoy you?

Depending on the time of day it might annoy me! I generally dislike trite phrases like “don’t worry, be happy” or “happiness isn’t a feeling, it’s a choice” or, my favourite, “don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.”

Maybe you like glib silver-lining type sayings, great! But just maybe “you can be a joyful person and it’s not that difficult, really!” might seem an insensitive jab at what you’re going through; an ignorance of the challenges you face; of the rejections you have in the past and are presently enduring.

It might seem a hopelessly naïve sentiment in the face of the threat to our dear earth, human-caused global warming; our best science to date telling us we have only 11 years to cut our global emissions in half or the whole thing becomes a runaway train.

What we’ve seemed to construct for ourselves, this hive of 7 ½ billion souls, is a den of anxiety and fear, rather than a place where we might cultivate, let alone easily, a garden of joy

I really do mean it as a piece of good news and not as a trite piece of advice meant to trivialize suffering or the anxieties we all share.

The Good News of God is never ignorant of our context, our finite condition or personality, certainly not of the suffering we may or will, certainly, one day face!

When, on the third Sunday of every Advent, the Great Tradition chooses texts that focus on joy and the possibility of becoming a joyful people it did so with our sins and failings in full view.

Furthermore, it did so far outside the conditions of modernity, far outside the securities of heated homes, electricity and the expectation of a long life!

It did so because, precisely within the context of human life as it is, precisely with our particular challenges, the living God is offering to give us, in the One who is Coming, the promise of the Holy Spirit..

So Paul is not trying to annoy us when he says, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.” He’s trying to encourage us to take a journey towards the hope that transcends our circumstances.

Speaking of a journey, If we look at the Bible as a whole we notice a pervasive pattern, it’s a pattern that Scripture doesn’t just invent, but reflects from within the larger human experience, the journey back to a homeland that has been taken from us either by our own wandering away from it or by circumstances outside of our control.

Our first reading stands in for hundreds of passages that comment on and prayerfully interact with the reality that we are restless creatures; that Jerusalem, whatever that means for us, is always somewhere just over the horizon, a place of Peace, wholeness, community solidarity and fulfilled identity.

This motif: people in exile, finding a temporary home, whether ancient Babylon, Abbotsford/Chilliwack Canada but longing for Jerusalem, Allepo, Cairo or the Punjab is as much a part of our reality as it was for ancient Israel,

We wander far from home but always long for it; like a deep ache in our arthritic bones that we can partially alleviate with medication of various sorts e.g. retail therapy, alcohol or cannabis therapy, sunshine therapy.

What really gets the ache out, however, is picking up those metaphorical bones and journeying towards our joy! But How?

Earlier I dared to say it isn’t really that difficult; I really don’t mean to mock us by saying it that way; I certainly don’t mean to equate the Joy we can know with ease, with lack of suffering, with total fulfillment.

Paul, himself, wrote these words from the confines of a hard prison cell! He certainly was not immune to anxiety, to depression, to worry and physical suffering; he admits to all of that and more in his letters.

And yet he dared to write, “Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice!” What did he mean by joy? For Paul, for Zephaniah, for the Bible as a whole, joy is the result of receiving our greatest hope and finding in that reception new agency, new capacity to act for the good of ourselves and others.

Joy is the result of receiving our greatest hope. What is that? Who is that? A loving God; a loving God coming to us in love! The otherwise gloomy book of Zephaniah erupts in Joy because of this, “The Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more,” “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in love!”

Here’s the thing, God does not delight in judgement and disaster; God loves everything that God has made; that means that God loves you and delights in you!

The only way we can avoid that love—actually it’s not an avoidance, but just a refusal to experience it!—is to deliberately remove ourselves from that experience;

John the Baptist tells us that yes, indeed, we can, in fact separate ourselves from the experience of that love—he tells us how we do it—but that, wonderfully, it’s not that difficult to reconnect with God’s Love!

Astoundingly, that’s what we celebrate at this table on a weekly basis, God drawing near in forgiving, cross-bearing love, not in the abstract, but for us!

God comes to us, and because of that coming we have agency, new capacity to act for the good of ourselves and others.

What John the Baptist proclaims, is not some exterior journey towards a far-distant joy, but actions that each of us can engage in right where we are.

The journey towards Joy, is the journey towards sharing the love of the God who forgives us with our immediate neighbours: with words but with a renewed agency that actually changes people and things for the better.

In response to John’s frightful sounding message that the ax is poised at the root of the tree, ready to chop it down, three groups ask, “if that’s what’s about to happen, what then shall we do, how shall we then live?”

Lauren Winner, a writer and Episcopalian priest writes that basically John said, “Do what you’re doing, but try to do it more decently and less exploitatively.”

The first group he addresses is the broadest, basically all people, “whoever has two coats, must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Our two greatest needs, food and shelter, are not something that only a certain percentage of people should have, all people should; each of us have been given the agency to share what we have.

Let’s get literal; do you have extra sweaters and coats hanging around? Share them; The Seafarers are always looking for such items, the Salvation Army.

In a world in which we need to cut our carbon-based emissions in half perhaps another application is sharing our homes; finding ways to live together that cuts our carbon footprint.

Joy is found when we creatively engage in finding solutions to sharing what God has given us!

The other two groups John addresses are groups that have the ability to threaten and extort from others by dint of their position or influence or power.

Again, to extend the application, all of us have the ability to manipulate others, to the degree that we do we are robbing them, and ourselves, of the Joy that comes from receiving God’s love and passing it on!

But when treat others with fairness, deference, respect we vibrate with feelings of “you did that right,” an inner beacon that says, “you’re on the right path!”

The One who Comes to us wants to blow away the chaff of selfishness from our lives revealing the true wheat within; The One who Comes to us in love wants to prune our lives of all joy-robbing behaviours.

If we’re used to living in these selfish ways it may, for a bit, feel like we’re being called a brood of vipers when we’re confronted with our sin; learning the habits of hope, peace and joy can feel like a cleansing fire; like the pain of a wound that has begun to heal.

it means we need to trust again in the Holy Spirit’s presence and provision but if we do we find the end of exile, we find we’ve come home: partnership with Christ’s Spirit who has set us all on the quest of Joy.