

Rejoice!

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

If you have been a Presbyterian most of your life, you probably did not bound out of bed this morning with relief because it is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete means Rejoice! In the otherwise penitential season of Advent, today the church pauses to rejoice. Yet being Presbyterian aside, I know there are many other reasons that rejoicing might not be the default setting of your heart in the days leading up to Christmas. “After a certain age,” began Jennifer Finney Boylan on Friday, an English professor at Barnard and one of my favorite writers in the New York Times, “Christmas can arrive with a little darkness. I’m used to it by now, the way the ghosts of Christmas Past sneak up on me, but it’s still hard. I miss my parents. I lament broken relationships. I worry about getting older, about the fate of the earth.....So there I was, one morning last week, sitting by the fire in my house in Maine as the tears rolled down.”

A strange beginning for a sermon on Gaudete Sunday, I know, but there are two reasons to begin here. The first I have already mentioned. I see your tears falling as we pass the peace on these Advent Sunday mornings—for a spouse who has died this year or is dying slowly by your side, for a love that has lost its luster and even grown cold, for a child estranged or addicted, for a friendship too broken to mend, for pain bearing down within and without, for years so soon gone. Like Boylan, we begin Gaudete Sunday in a little darkness also because our worry for a world dwelling in darkness: the helpless parents of starving and dying children in Yemen, the grieving parents of 40,000 souls shot in this nation last year, the inconsolable parents of Sandy Hook’s children whose hearts are still aching seven years later, the homeless mostly grandparents in California, their memories gone up in smoke, facing the what is left of their lives like Job, sitting on an ash heap that once was Paradise, the desperate parents waiting with their children on the borders of hope now closed to them. Our human condition is the first reason we begin together this morning in a little darkness as tears roll down our faces.

The second reason is because Zephaniah and Paul begin there too. Zephaniah addresses the collective darkness of a nation. Eight out of the prophet’s nine oracles pronounce devastating judgment against the idolatry, the corruption and the injustice of Judah in the seventh century B.C. Writing to the Philippian church from prison, Paul addresses an internal conflict created by members at odds with each other over circumcision and an external threat created by outsiders who oppose the gospel, both forms of darkness causing the community to suffer division. The chaos of our common life is the second reason we begin together in a little darkness.

Yet Zephaniah commands the nation to “Sing aloud! Shout! Rejoice and exult,” even though the people are dwelling in darkness and then promises them, in the past perfect tense of his last oracle, unimaginable joy: The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, has turned away your enemies, has ended your fear, has given victory, has renewed God’s love, has removed disaster, has saved the lame, has gathered the outcast and has led you home. Likewise Paul tells this conflicted congregation to rejoice, to worry about nothing, and to trust that the peace of God, which surpasses anything that makes sense to them right now, will guard their hearts and minds. I read those words and I try to imagine the parents of starving Yemeni children, the families of the dead whose names were on our lawn last month, the community of Paradise, refugees all over the world and each of you actually rejoicing. How can this be?

The answer is stunning. We may rejoice in our little darkness because the darkness is precisely where God is coming to dwell. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, Karl Barth observes, “God acts and speaks [from out of the darkness], taking the lost cause of [mortals] out of their hands, making it [God’s] own, intervening majestically, mercifully and wisely for [us].” When Zephaniah tells the people of Judah not to fear, but to rejoice because God will renew them in love, remove disaster from them, save the lame, gather the outcast, bring them home, I think he is trying to give God’s people eyes to see God’s hand precisely in their own darkness. When Paul tells the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord who is near and counsels them against worrying, he is turning them to trust God’s reconciling presence precisely in the spaces between them. We rejoice because God chooses still to dwell where we really live and where we really die. That is why Barth tells the inmates in Basel Prison

that “The place where the Saviour enters in looks rather like the stable of Bethlehem. It is not beautiful, but quite ugly; not at all cozy, but really frightening; not at all decently human, but right beside the animals....Down below [in the darkness], we are, without exception...only people who have lost their way. Down there Jesus Christ sets up quarters.... There we need him”, and there we rejoice in him.

So unlike the willed joys of a holiday, the joy of Gaudete Sunday is, first of all, the sort of joy we may only receive as an unexpected, unimaginable, utterly undeserved gift. Each one of us in this sanctuary has known the gift of such joy, though we may not have recognized the giver. Even and especially when we are doing our best to avoid each little darkness by striving and achieving and acquiring and doing, joy arrests our movement, stops us in our tracks, leaves us speechless before the gift of it all. Joy, Barth says, “is the true form of every such arrest....Joy is really the simplest form of gratitude. When we are joyful, time stands still for a moment or moments because it has fulfilled its meaning.”

That is why, in the second place, all we can do is hold ourselves in readiness to receive such joy. Put another way, we must practice paying attention. It is what we do not only on this Sunday but every Sunday. One day of the week we pause to practice rejoicing before we return to our lives racing toward their end. I think of Emily’s monologue in *Our Town* before she lets go of earth and returns to the grave: “It goes so fast,” she says as she wanders among the living. “We don’t have time to look at one another. I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back -- up the hill -- to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-bye, Good-bye world. Good-bye, Grover’s Corners....Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking....and Mama’s sunflowers. And food and coffee. Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it--every, every minute?” “No,” the Stage Manager replies. “The saints and poets, maybe they do some.” Maybe that is why I love the questions Mary Oliver asks in her poem “Gratitude” that make me pause: *What did you notice? What did you hear? What did you admire? What astonished you? What would you like to see again? What was most tender? What was most wonderful? What did you think was happening?* To answer those question is, I think, to pray. Even though we have made the season set aside by the church for waiting, listening, watching, and wondering into a season of consuming, rushing, overindulging and emotionally crashing, for one hour, in song and silence and prayer, we will have practiced holding ourselves in readiness to receive joy.

Then in the third place, we receive joy, Barth says, “only as we give [joy] to others....joy is a social matter.” In this season of giving, we tend to give to others what gives us joy rather than asking, from their standpoint, what truly gives them joy. The incarnation is our clue about God’s delivery system for joy. It is an embodied, self-giving love that takes the other’s needs, hopes, longings and lostness as our own. I think of O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi,” the story of a poor couple whose two most precious possessions were the wife’s beautiful hair and the husband’s inherited gold watch. The wife sells her hair to buy a chain for her beloved’s watch and the husband sells his watch to buy the combs his beloved had longed to have ever since she had seen them in a store window. “Each sold the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for another,” O. Henry concluded. The true gift, of course, was the depth of love for the other revealed in the sacrifice of both. The true gift of Christmas is the depth of God’s love for us revealed in the sacrifice of God’s Son. Joy is a costly gift in a world or a nation or a household where each one wills to have only his or her own joy which turns out to be no joy at all. We may receive joy only as our hands and hearts are outstretched to give joy to another, especially another walking in darkness.

Poet Jan Richardson writes of Gaudete Sunday that it traces “the path we make/when we go deep/and deeper still/into the dark/and look behind to see/the way has been lit/by our rejoicing.” Earthly joy is provisional, a flash of light shining in the darkness, but it is enough to keep us until that day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death will be no more, neither sorrow nor crying nor any more pain. As the tears rolled down Jennifer Finney Boylan’s face that morning by the fire, her 13 year-old Labrador, Ranger, came over and put his gray muzzle on her lap. His tail thumped upon the floor. Hey, you, the dog seemed to say. Remember the good things.” Remember the joy. Thanks be to God!