

+ Zephaniah 3:14-17 + Images of a Coming Savior: The Lord Is With You +
+ 3rd Sunday in Advent + 16 December 2012 +

It just doesn't seem to stop, does it? The craziness of these weeks leading up to Christmas never seems to slow down. There's so much to do and so much going on at home, at school, at work, even at church! It's been crazy since Thanksgiving and we still have another week to go before Christmas. You try with all your might to keep your head above water or at least on top of what needs to be done, where you need to go, and when you have to be where. If this is supposed to be a time of hope, joy, and peace, you're hoping for the joy you'll feel when you have peace again after Christmas.

You wonder how you can find some joy in these last Advent days before Christmas. After all, this is a time to prepare for the coming of a Savior who will actually bring joy and peace, but it certainly doesn't seem like you have either the time to prepare or the patience to wait. What joy do you have in that? Then you turn on the news and hear bad news about the fiscal cliff and sickening news of monstrous acts in a mall and an elementary school. Frankly, it's a lot easier to have the "Christmas blues" than Advent joy!

You find your seat here at church and you're frazzled. You're stressed out after another long week of work and school and running around. You've been burning the candle on both ends and you're tired. Maybe you even hope that Pastor's sermon isn't so boring and the church not so warm, because you know you'll drift off if they are. On the other hand.... You look in the worship folder and a quick scan of the hymns and lessons keeps bringing up that word—rejoice. Rejoice in what? How could you possibly rejoice with what's going on in your life and what's going on in the world?

In the midst of your internal conversation, an unfamiliar gentleman sits down next to you. You notice he, too, is getting ready for worship. "I'm so excited to be here to worship the Lord today! Doesn't it just fill you with joy to **'sing'** to the Lord? It makes you want to **'shout...and rejoice with all your heart'**." His joy seems to be exactly the opposite of how you feel. You hesitate to ask, but you just can't help yourself. "Why? Why should I rejoice today? Things have been so crazy lately. I barely have time to sleep, let alone get excited for worship on another Sunday. How can I rejoice?"

The unfamiliar man smiles and says to you, "Friend, what is it that robs you and me of joy? Sin. Sin fills your life with guilt, with consequences, with stress, with tension, with hurt, with worry, with anxiety, with fear. Sin leaves you broken and battered and bruised and barely able to pick yourself up off the floor sometimes. Everyone loves temptation, but regrets what follows.

You think you don't like sin and what it does to your life? The holy God hates it even more. He hates sin because it ruined his perfect creation. It destroyed his perfect, loving relationship with people like you and me. It's also rebellion against his holy will and rears its ugly head every day in every life. Every single sinner is hostile to him, and therefore, deserves his holy wrath and eternal condemnation. There's no joy in that.

"...But the Lord of free and faithful grace **'has taken away your punishment'**, and all his judgment against you. In his holiness, he had to carry out that punishment, yet in his love, he did not want to punish you. So at just the right time, God sent his one and only Son into this world. That Son of God became a human being just like you to bear your guilt, your stress, your tension, your hurt, your worry, your anxiety. Jesus came to bind your broken heart, to heal your battered and bruised soul, to pick you up and restore you to a new life as a forgiven child of God. He faced temptation and didn't give in so he could put himself in your place and endure the punishment, the judgment you deserve for your sin. He bore the full wrath of God even as he bore the full weight of your sins and mine. Then he gave his life to pay in full the wages of your sins and mine. Now you sit here forgiven, ransomed, restored! You can rejoice in that!"

"Yes, I can," you respond, "...But something still keeps me from rejoicing. It's been a rough year. I lost a loved one recently. This time of year reminds me of those who aren't with me anymore. I worry about my loved one who's sick. I watch the news and I fear for my family, my children, my friends ...and I have to admit that the possibility of my own death, my own mortality is scary. How can I possibly rejoice with all that weighing on my heart?"

The unfamiliar man pauses before he responds. "You're not the only one. Death robs joy from everyone, whether that's when you lose a loved one or when you have to face death yourself. Death leaves you lonely, empty, aching, angry, fearful, and that's because death wasn't originally meant for us human beings. Death hurts and stings, because deep down we all know that death is unnatural. It leaves tears of sorrow where once were smiles of joy. Sadly death has been robbing people of joy since Adam and Eve brought death into our world. Death has been our enemy ever since.

"...But you know what? **'[The LORD] has turned back your enemy.'** When Jesus died on the cross so many years ago, he took away your punishment. He endured the judgment you deserve for your sins, but he didn't stay dead.

There was one last enemy that the Lord had to defeat to fully remove your punishment. He had to conquer death. None of us could do that, but God himself took on that enemy, and what a fight it was! Death thought he had won on Calvary as the breath of life fled Jesus' body, but three days later, it was death fleeing from Jesus' empty tomb. **'The LORD your God'** shattered death's icy grip and destroyed its power forever. The enemy fled before your living Savior like a routed army, and there was nothing death could do. "So now for believers like yourself and your loved ones in the Lord, death doesn't have to be so terrifying. It will still be scary at times, but for believers like you and me, it's become a shadow, a sleep, a doorway through which you pass to eternal glory with the living Lord who loves you and saved you. Christ has removed the terrible consequences of your sin and has opened the way to eternal life with him. Surely that gives you reason to rejoice!"

"Yes, it does," you respond, feeling more relieved, "But there's one more thing weighing on my heart. How can I find joy living in a world like this? People I know are worried about their jobs and incomes. They're worried about their future and the future of their kids and grandkids. They wonder if life will keep getting worse. I worry too, and then I see things on the news like I saw this past week—terrible tragedies, monstrous acts against children and adults. What joy can I possibly have living in a world like this?"

The unfamiliar man looks you in the eye and says, "There are so many unanswered questions, so many things that are shaking people to the core of their being right now, but as a child of God, there is one thing of which you can be certain. **'The LORD...is with you.... The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.'** God isn't some distant deity who has nothing to do with what's going on here on earth and who doesn't pay attention to his people. No, your God and mine is the exact opposite. This God **is with you**, in the midst of his people with his protecting power.

"Remember, he's **the Mighty Warrior** who took on your judgment, who turned back that enemy Death, and who opened the gates to heaven with his glorious resurrection. That's the One, who's by your side. He protects you from harm. He delivers you from evil. Does that mean he won't let evil come into your life? No. As long as you live in this evil, sinful world, as long as you still carry that inbred sinful nature within you, evil will still be present, but this is the One who has overcome the world! This is the One who can actually do something about the evil in this world! This is the One who will one day remove the evil that causes people to do such awful things like on Friday.

"Now if you're still not sure he can or will do that, just look back to the Christchild lying in that feeding trough. He came into our world of violence and evil and sin to rescue people so deeply lost in sin and unbelief and deliver them from hell's death. Look back to the dusty roads he trod walking in your shoes, facing your temptations, overcoming evil for you. Look back to the cross and see what seemed like the darkest day in human history, and see him overcome the ultimate evil for you. Look back to the tomb and see in its emptiness the proof that **'the LORD your God'** has overcome the world.

"Now **'the LORD your God'** dwells with you and all believers in Christ. With his gracious presence here in his Word and Sacrament, he calms your raging fear and anxiety. With his comforting Word and Sacrament, he dries those tears of grief for the victims of evil and of worry for future generations, so you can let your light shine with real joy in this dark, evil world.

'Don't fear...Don't let your hands hang limp.' No, refreshed by his comfort and peace and forgiveness through his Word and Supper, rejoice because you have another opportunity to serve your Lord, who's with you. He guaranteed that with blood and an empty tomb, and if that's not enough, do you realize he rejoices over you too? He's made you his child through faith in him. Now he takes **'great delight in you'**. In his great love for you, he doesn't rebuke you, but in fact, rejoices **'over you with singing'**.

"Friend, I know how overwhelming your life can be, especially this time of year, and how exhausted and frazzled you feel. I know how easy it is to be filled with worry, with fear, with anxiety about the future and about your life. I know how evil this world can really be and how utterly shocking that evil can be. It's hard to live in this world. It's so challenging to rejoice in these Advent weeks before Christmas, especially after Friday's tragedy, but there's one thing without any doubt that causes me to rejoice. The Lord of free and faithful grace—Jesus Christ, my loving, living, coming Savior—is with me with his boundless, protecting love, and he's with you. Yes, the same **'Mighty Warrior who saves'** is with you too! My friend, let's rejoice this morning, because the LORD our God is with us! Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and renew our hearts with the joy of your coming!" Amen.