

Zephaniah 3:7-18 12/13/09 3 Advent Pastor Bill Uetracht

Sing “It don’t mean a thing, if it ain’t got that swing. Doo-wop, doo-wop, doo-wop.” If it don’t hop, if it don’t jump, if it don’t pulsate, if it don’t lead to movement, to dance, if it isn’t full of joy, that song ain’t worth a thing—so sang Duke Ellington many years ago. I think the Duke has the right spirit for today, the third weekend of Advent. Music, at its deepest and its best is an expression of joy. Now that is not to say that there isn’t room for the sad songs. In fact, I am a big fan of the sad songs. On Thanksgiving Day night Tom Freeman and I spent some time singing old-time sad country music songs, karaoke style. After singing one of my favorites I said to Tom, “They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.” Alan Jackson is right: “there’s nothing like a steel guitar to drown a memory.” Sad songs are wonderful. But not for today. Today’s song is a song of joy, a song of rejoicing, song that has lots of swing.

In the history of the church, this weekend in Advent was often called the gaudete weekend. “Gaudete” is the Latin word for rejoicing or joy. Advent in the ancient church, like Lent, was thought to be a somber time, a time of great reflection and penitence. On the third weekend of Advent, as on the fifth weekend of Lent, people were given a little break from the somberness, from the hard work, the fasting of Advent. This was to be a weekend of joy. By the way, we mark this joyful time with a pink candle on the Advent wreath. The somberness of blue gives way to the brightness and joy of pink.

This is a day of rejoicing, a day of joy, a day for the music to swing. “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart!” So says the prophet Zephaniah. These words are a bit surprising for Zephaniah. I mean, let’s face it. He is not known for

being overly joyous. This is a prophet who makes it quite clear that the people of Israel have sinned and so have the nations. This is a prophet who speaks a lot about doom, gloom, and judgment. Yet at the end of his book he invites a joyous response from the people of Israel. Something new is occurring, he is saying. Many scholars believe that this particular portion of Zephaniah was written to celebrate the homecoming of the exiles from their time in the Babylonian empire.

Whatever the occasion for this text, the message is clear. It's time to rejoice. Why? Because God has taken away the judgments against his people. He is now setting them free from their punishments. They have gotten a free "get out of jail" card. Their God is in their midst. They need to fear disaster no more. God is dealing with their enemies. And then, in what I think is the most interesting part of the text, we are told that God is rejoicing over Israel with gladness. He is rejoicing over them with loud singing as on a day of a festival, a party.

Here's the image: God is singing over God's people. And in this case, he isn't singing a sweet lullaby. He isn't singing the sad, sad song that is producing tears in his beer. No, he is singing the joyful song. He's singing the party song. His song has got swing. As Will Smith sang a few years back, God is "getting jiggy with it." His song is not a little quiet song that is whispered so no one can hear him. No, he is singing loudly. He is singing as if he is at a party and all inhibitions are gone, and, therefore, I trust he is moving. God is rejoicing over his people. He is bringing them home. He is dealing with those who have oppressed his people. He is protecting the lame and the outcast among them. Everybody is being included in this party. The fortunes of the people of God are being changed right before their very eyes.

So the message is, “Rejoice! Again, I say it, rejoice.” Join the song! Sing aloud. Exult with all of your heart!

Now I know that Christmas time isn’t always the easiest of times to be joyous. I mean, the schedule! I mean, the responsibilities. I mean, the shopping. I mean, the expectations. I mean, the family gatherings. I mean, the crabby people in line, the people who are after the latest gadget that we are after. Be joyful? You’ve got to be kidding.

But people, God is up to something new. God is singing loudly over us. He is throwing a party for us. All these other distractions sometimes simply mean that we aren’t making it to the party. But the heavens are rejoicing. They’ve got that swing. Can’t you hear their loud singing?

“Glory, glory, glory to the newborn king.
Jesus, my Jesus, O, what a wonderful child.
Jesus, my Jesus: so holy, meek and mild.
New life, new hope, new joy he brings
So won’t you listen to the angels sing:
Glory, glory, glory to the new born king.”

Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always! The Lord is near. What is really real, what is truly true about life is near. And it comes not from ourselves but from the heavens, from the coming God who sings and dances over us as on a day of a party. Advent points us to that God. We will meet him in the joy and playfulness of a little baby born in a cattle stall. We will meet this dancing and singing God in a man who says that the year of jubilee, the year of partying, has come in him. We will meet him in a dying man who will make it clear to another dying man that the judgments of God have been taken away. (“Today you will be with me in paradise.”) We will meet him as the death of Jesus

gives way to resurrected life—life that will open our eyes and burn joy into our hearts.

Rejoice! This is the time to come to the party. This is the time to dance. If life don't got that swing, it don't mean a thing. God has got the swing, so it means a great thing. It means that we are called to joy, raucous joy.

But you ask me: doesn't John the Baptist seem a little out of step today, then? "You brood of vipers, you children of snakes, you lower than low-belly people!" Who wants that to show up on our joyful Christmas cards? Certainly not me! Did John not get the memo about rejoicing? Is he the party pooper today? Do I have to take back all that I said about singing and dancing?

I don't think so. I think John understands the party. But he realizes that God's party is not an exercise in self protection or promotion. It is not a party that rejoices in your laurels or your labels. Your ethnic background, your wealth, your great achievements, your religious connections don't mean much to the party thrower. If you think they do, repent! What matters to the party thrower is that everybody gets to come, that everybody gets to enjoy the singing, dancing, and the eating, and that, therefore, you live out generosity. So if you have two coats, give one of them away to those who have none. And if you have extra food, give it away. The party includes everyone; therefore, everyone must be included. Everyone must have the opportunity to swing, to move with the music, to rejoice with the one who is singing and dancing over us.

The party is not about you getting more and more. It is not intended to be the non-ending buffet experience. Actually, it includes the possibility for contentment. To tax collectors, John says, "Collect no

more than the amount prescribed for you.” To soldiers, he says, “Do not extort from anyone by threats, but rather be satisfied with your wages.” Live life contented. The party is not about gluttony. Let’s tell the truth. Seldom does more and more mean increased joy. The current stories around Tiger Woods are probably an unsettling and sobering reminder of that truth.

“It don’t mean a thing, if it ain’t got that swing.” The song that is being sung today isn’t a sad song. It is a song of joy. God is singing it. He is pulsating to it. He is dancing to it. Come, join the song. Join the dance. And invite others. Share with others. Be generous to others. This is a song and a dance that is to be shared by all. Just last week, John the Baptist yelled out: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; **and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.**” Make a way for the singing and dancing God so that *all* can join the song and the dance.