

12.15.24 ~ Advent 3 ~ Joy
“This Messenger Brings Joy!”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Zephaniah 3:14-20 ^{NIV}

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

¹⁶ On that day they will say to Jerusalem,
“Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.”

¹⁸ “I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you.

¹⁹ At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you.

I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles.

I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame.

²⁰ At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home.

I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the Lord.

Leader: These Joyful Words Prepare Us!

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 3:7-18 ^{NLT}

⁷ When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, “You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? ⁸ Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ⁹ Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ The crowds asked, “What should we do?”

¹¹ John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.”

¹² Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³ He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.”

¹⁴ “What should we do?” asked some soldiers.

John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.”

¹⁵ Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so

much greater that I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.” ¹⁸ John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

Leader: These Expectant Words Are from God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Prophetic and joyful God, we come to you in gratitude for the Scriptures that teach us how much you rejoice over us, when we should be rejoicing over you! May our time together singing, playing, praying, learning, and fellowshiping be a blessing to you as much as they bless us. Help us to better prepare our spirits for the messengers announcing the Messiah who comes. As we prepare for him, may we actively choose hope over giving up, peace over hate, and joy over sadness. During this season and today's message, let us renew our joy in you and share it with others at this time of year. Speak to us through your messenger and this message. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It was indeed a joyful and busy week within the church family, despite our prayer announcements today. Our Young at Heart Gadabouts group met for a delicious lunch and fellowship at Milano's; I had building and space contacts and prep this week; refocused on re-missioning and discipling with peer groups; enjoyed the Shepherd's Center lunch and concert at Annandale United Methodist Church with Annandale High School choirs; supported our food mission; choir practice; and topped it off with welcoming a large audience for the Sopranessence holiday concert. We had the honor of hosting Mason District former supervisor Penny Gross, Arts Advisory committee members James Albright and his wife, Erin, Stuart Holt from Arts Fairfax, and Senior Center groups from Reston and Lincolnia! We are so blessed by your support, this space we have, and how the community is responding to our engagement! I share this to help you see how your church is more than just Sundays or our

small gathering. We come each week to re-fuel and refresh so that we may pour out Christ's love 24/7! Keep coming and keep praying for how God is still working here and beyond. That is a joyful message of renewal and revitalization.

Now, today is the third Sunday in Advent, so you have been reading the inserts and know that this season is for waiting and preparation for the Christ's incarnation and birth as well as a personal season of prayer and contemplation. Today for our normal service, we experience JOY. Even before he arrives or we get any presents, we are joyful in the waiting! And joyful in the message! You personally may not be ready for this joy yet **or** you may already be filled with Christmas excitement. Both of those things can be true. We even see with our Scriptures today that our messengers bring warnings of punishment then predictions of great forgiveness and compassion. Both may be and are true. So, it might be helpful to keep our Easter story in the back of your mind as we approach Christmas. The resurrected Christ is our ultimate story of joy. But first . . .

Zephania was a man of prominence, the great, great grandson of Hezekiah, King of Judah. At this time around 600 BC, Jerusalem was wicked, rebellious, and defiled and would soon be judged harshly by Yahweh. In his first few chapters, this prophet proclaimed that they would be punished, but for our passage in Chapter 3, he flips to say that God will restore Israel and redeem the nation (if they repent, of course!). The people were told to rejoice because a Messiah King was coming! God's wrath would go away, and he would rejoice over **them** as well. His joy and delight would wash over his chosen people, Israel, the remnant of believers left. Israel's foreign oppressors would be removed as God

willed; and those believers who scattered will reunite and regather in the Promised Land, where God will establish his kingdom—in the eschaton, the day of reckoning.

You may be asking the question, why is John the Baptist used on two Sundays of Advent in the Lectionary? Well, last week, he announced the birth of Jesus and his saving return at the end of history. Also, remember that John the Baptist is the last of the “old covenant” prophets. For hundreds of years, there had been no prophet in Israel, so John was a celebrity of sorts as a new prophet, but the last of that kind. Finally, remember that John the Baptist is a witness to and Jesus’s forerunner in birth, message, and death. He literally prepared the way for Christ by being born first, delivering a message of repentance and joy, and dying a gruesome death – all before Jesus experienced the same life milestones. We are called to worship the babe in a manger, but also to take up his cross and follow him. Like Zephania, John was preparing the people to meet God in the flesh, and to experience the loving fellowship of a creator who loved them, would provide for them, and ultimately forgive them.

In verses 10-14 of Luke, John declares social responsibility, but not out of the guilt of repentance as some preach, but out of joy! Today’s combined service to recognize our community work through the New United Gospel Food Mission collaborative food giveaway will be that type of celebration. It is hard work to take on the needs of others; it can be an overwhelming task to do it alone, but as a team of committed volunteers, it brings joy and fellowship! The social and economic concerns of others are real: children going without food, books, or toys;

people in the margins needing shelter in frigid temperatures and food items to supplement county meals. Our small contributions plus the personal time, conversation, and attention go a long way toward survival and self-respect. A real community of relationships is forming, and isn't that what Jesus did? Eat with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and beggars? Heal their wounds both physically and emotionally? We are really giving away love and our own joy of being useful to someone else. Just looking people in the eye, paying a fair wage, recycling bags, donating food or funds, driving safely not aggressively, and being polite may seem old fashioned but are desperately needed in today's world. Keep doing those generous, Christ-like things!

This generation needs our wisdom and compassion. This is the joy that Christ brings—thinking of others before ourselves! John prepares the way for a messenger, Jesus, who brings the ultimate joy of grace and fellowship with the triune God! He brings us all hope, peace, joy, and love. And through his sacrifice on the cross, we are able to experience not only this joy of receiving salvation, but also the joy of sharing it with others. Are we ready to receive such joy? I hope so! If not, re-read the Advent insert and Debbie's testimony of finding joy in difficult times. As Christ Followers, it is our duty as well as privilege to find that joy. Get ready! Amen? Amen! ||

Let us pray. Eternal God, we thank you today and every day for your gift of beauty, hope, peace, and joy. We ask you to open our hearts to joy in this season of waiting. May the joy of your messengers, both John and Jesus, fill our lives, our homes, and our relationships, drawing us together

in community. Be with us in our combined service at 1 pm and fellowship meal following this afternoon. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Remember to announce the Combined Service & Faith Potluck meal before Benediction!