December 12, 2021 ~ 3rd Sunday of Advent ~ JOY

I speak to you in the name of our God of JOY. Amen.

If I were to ask you to name some famous prophets in the Old Testament, I believe that you would start with Isaiah and then move to Jeremiah and Ezekiel. You might name some other prophets such as Micah, Amos, Joel or Hosea but our reading for this morning is from a prophet that we know very little about. His name was Zephaniah, not to be confused with the prophet Zechariah.

Like all prophets, Zephaniah gave a prophecy of coming judgement from the Lord. Zechariah writes about judgment on Israel’s enemies and on the wickedness of the people of Jerusalem. Zephaniah prophesied that the Lord “will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth.” Punishment from the Lord was coming. However, Zephaniah ends with a joyful message of hope and trust and mercy.

We call the ending of the biblical book of Zephaniah ***A Song of Joy.***

*Sing aloud, rejoice with all your heart. The Lord, your God, is in your midst. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will renew you in his love.* (From Zephaniah 3:14-20)

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Advent. I am in the pink (I show my pink vestments to the congregation and to the live-streamers). This is the Sunday of JOY. Gaudete Sunday. Rejoice. Rejoice.

The prophet Isaiah (from our sung canticle this morning) tells us to be JOYFUL.

*With JOY you will draw water from the wells of salvation. Sing for JOY*. (from Isaiah 12:2-6)

At the end of his letter to Christians in Philippi, the apostle Paul writes a powerful message of JOY:

*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice*. Philippians 4:4

If you didn’t know the Advent blessing we were focusing on this morning, it becomes very apparent from all the scripture selected for this day. However, the theme is a little harder to discern with the gospel. John the Baptist is baptizing people in the river Jordan. He tells all the candidates to be honest and be satisfied with what they have. John tells the people that he is the messenger and that the powerful one, meaning Jesus, will be coming. John is very clear that this is the good news of the gospel and the word gospel means good news. The end result of the gospel passage is that we experience JOY through the good news of our salvation.

Before the JOY though, comes repentance and forgiveness. Someone was recently talking to me about a beloved family member and I was told very clearly that “this person never sinned.” My thought was “oh really.” It is true that the person never robbed a bank or got in trouble with the law or beat up anybody. But sin is anytime we are turning away from God. Sin is not putting God first in our lives. Sin is experiencing anger, or jealousy, or self-centredness. Sin includes thoughts, words, and actions or inactions. I know that sin is not a popular word but the truth is that we all sin.

Here is how St. Augustine defined sin ~ “a word, deed, or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God.” Sin is a loss of love for God and a heightened self-love.

The truth is that when we repent as we will in our confession this morning, we acknowledge all our shortcomings. And we turn to our God of JOY, our God of HOPE, and our God of PEACE.

At the end of his life, the author Robert Louis Stevenson said that “to miss the joy is to miss everything.”

 When Jesus was born, the angels said,**“***I bring you Good News of Great Joy for all the people!”(*Luke 2:10).  Even John the Baptist, still in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, upon hearing about Jesus, *“leaped for joy in her womb!”* (Luke 1:44)

How much JOY are you experiencing? Do you want more JOY in your life? The key question to ask is how do we get more JOY? We ask for it. It is a gift from God.

When we turn to Jesus, when we ask him to walk with us during all of our adventures here on earth, we are blessed with JOY! Joy happens when we make others happy. JOY is a fruit of living a life of kindness and generosity.

I have been telling you wisdom stories throughout Advent and here is my story for today. Extracted here is a nugget from ‘Bombay (Now, Mumbai) to Bangalore, one of the most heartwarming stories in this collection written by Sudha Murty:

It was the beginning of summer. I was boarding Udyan Express at Gulbarga railway station. My destination was Bangalore. As I boarded the train, I saw that the second-class reserved compartment was jam-packed with people. I sat down and was pushed to the corner of the berth. Though it was meant for three people, there were already six of us sitting on it…

The ticket collector came in and started checking people’s tickets and reservations. Suddenly, he looked in my direction and asked, ‘What about your ticket?’ ‘I have already shown my ticket to you,’ I said.

‘Not you, madam, the girl hiding below your berth. Hey, come out, where is your ticket?’ I realized that someone was sitting below my berth. When the collector yelled at her, the girl came out of hiding.

She was thin, dark, scared and looked like she had been crying profusely. She must have been about thirteen or fourteen years old. She had uncombed hair and was dressed in a torn skirt and blouse. She was trembling and folded both her hands.. The collector started forcibly pulling her out from the compartment. Suddenly, I had a strange feeling. I stood up and called out to the collector. ‘Sir, I will pay for her ticket,’ I said. Then he looked at me and said, ‘Madam, if you give her ten rupees, she will be much happier with that than with the ticket.’

I did not listen to him. I told the collector to give me a ticket to the last destination, Bangalore, so that the girl could get down wherever she wanted.

Slowly, she started talking. She told me that her name was Chitra. She lived in a village near Bidar. Her father was a coolie and she had lost her mother at birth. Her father had remarried and had two sons with her stepmother. But a few months ago, her father had died. Her stepmother started beating her often and did not give her food. She was tired of that life. She did not have anybody to support her so she left home in search of something better.

By this time, the train had reached Bangalore. I said goodbye to Chitra and got down from the train. My driver came and picked up my bags. I felt someone watching me. When I turned back, Chitra was standing there and looking at me with sad eyes. But there was nothing more that I could do. I had paid her ticket out of compassion but I had never thought that she was going to be my responsibility!

I told her to get into my car. My driver looked at the girl curiously. I told him to take us to my friend Ram’s place. Ram ran separate shelter homes for boys and girls. We at the Infosys Foundation supported him financially. I thought Chitra could stay there for some time and we could talk about her future after I came back from my tours.

I was not sure if Chitra would even be there. But to my surprise, I saw Chitra looking much happier than before. Ram suggested that Chitra could go to a high school nearby. I immediately agreed and said that I would sponsor her expenses as long as she continued to study. I left the shelter knowing that Chitra had found a home and a new direction in her life.

I got busier and my visits to the shelter reduced to once a year. But I always enquired about Chitra’s well-being over the phone. I knew that she was studying well and that her progress was good.. I offered to sponsor her college studies if she wanted to continue studying. But she said, ‘No, Akka. I have talked to my friends and made up my mind. I would like to do my diploma in computer science so that I can immediately get a job after three years.’ She wanted to become economically independent as soon as possible. Chitra obtained her diploma with flying colours. She also got a job in a software company as an assistant testing engineer. When she got her first salary, she came to my office with a sari and a box of sweets.

One day, when I was in Delhi, I got a call from Chitra. She was very happy. ‘Akka, my company is sending me to USA! I wanted to meet you and take your blessings but you are not here in Bangalore.’.

Years passed. Occasionally, I received an e-mail from Chitra. She was doing very well in her career. She was posted across several cities in USA and was enjoying life. I silently prayed that she should always be happy wherever she was.

Years later, I was invited to deliver a lecture in San Francisco for Kannada Koota, an organization where families who speak Kannada meet and organize events. The lecture was in a convention hall of a hotel and I decided to stay at the same hotel. After the lecture, I was planning to leave for the airport. When I checked out of the hotel room and went to the reception counter to pay the bill, the receptionist said, ‘Ma’am, you don’t need to pay us anything. The lady over there has already settled your bill. She must know you pretty well.’ I turned around and found Chitra there.

She was standing with a young man and wore a beautiful sari. She was looking very pretty with short hair. Her dark eyes were beaming with happiness and pride. As soon as she saw me, she gave me a brilliant smile, hugged me and touched my feet. I was overwhelmed with joy and did not know what to say. I was very happy to see the way things had turned out for Chitra. But I came back to my original question. ‘Chitra, why did you pay my hotel bill? That is not right.’ Suddenly sobbing, she hugged me and said, ‘Because you paid for my ticket from Bombay to Bangalore!’

JOY is a gift which enables us to live with spiritual freedom. I am joyful that we are having the Rotary Carol Sing this evening when we couldn’t have it last year. I am joyful that we can receive communion together. I am joyful that I am wearing pink today. I am joyful for your faith and for the many kind acts and words you are continuing doing with each other. I am joyful for the on-line service of lessons and carols put together by the Anglican Church of Canada and which includes 8 people from this parish! I am joyful that I can remember all my Dad’s many good deeds of compassion and generosity. I am joyful that I can try to imitate him.

I am joyful that the Lord is here with us.

I am joyful that we can draw water from the well of our salvation.

JOY. Jesus first, others second, and ourselves (the you) third.

Joy to the world. The Saviour reigns! Amen.