

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (p. 768)

DECEMBER 12, 2021

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 (p. 953)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We ask for your Overwhelming Peace this morning Lord, so that we might pause from the busyness, and realize that we are not the center of our world. We ask for your Wisdom and Insight Lord, so that we might redirect our thoughts towards you. And mostly Father, we ask for you to open our eyes to the Truth, so that all that we say, and all that we do, will be pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

"REJOICE ALWAYS"

Tis thirteen days before Christmas, and all through this place, people are scurrying as if in a race! The church looks quite festive, and so do our homes. The problem is, though, folks are feeling alone! There are errands to run, and shopping to do. I'm supposed to be joyful, but what I feel is "Boo Hoo"! The guests are soon coming, expecting good cheer. Quickly now, hurry up, get it in gear! There is so much to do before the end of the day, errands and appointments, and of course the Church Play! I'd love to settle down for some prayerful respite. But I know if I do, I'll wake panicked in the night! So Merry Christmas to all, in this season of love. And my pray for you is, you're not described as above!

I know, it's Corny! The question is, does it ring true? Because according to the statistics, people are stressed during the Holidays. Shocking, isn't it? Doctor Oz says that 88% of Americans are "overly anxious this time of year". Eighty-eight percent!

And right after he said that, a commercial came on advertising a Smart Phone App that helps you stay calm! Apparently, people are stressed, and have been for quite some time! Maybe you've noticed? In fact, it's probably worse this year, with all of the unknowns and such! So, what I wondering is, can relate? Or are you part of that "stress-free" twelve percent? I mean, here we are smack dab in the middle of Advent, waiting for the arrival of our Lord! And yet most of us are running Too and Fro like those proverbial "chickens"! Christmas is just around the corner, and quite frankly coming fast! So, is "Peace on Earth" what you feel right now? What you see? How about, "Goodwill towards Man"?

Oh, there are pockets. Pockets of peace. Days, hours, moments. People even. Which are all quite wonderful! But as a whole, doesn't it seem as if stress is winning? There is a lot of shopping to do! There are presents to wrap, and decorations to hang! There are beds to be made, and guest rooms to prepare! We all have things to check off our lists, right, and other lists that still need to make!

And it's not just the Holidays either! Not according to the experts. People are pretty much "frantic" all year long. The expectations are simply too high—those assigned to us by others, but often, those we place on ourselves! People work all day long, and then do more at night! Our weekends are stuffed clear to the gills! And most of us are trying to fit in even more! School activities! Work functions! Social Commitments and Friends! Church even! The problem is, each one can chip away at our peaceful resolve!

And yet today we hear Paul say “Rejoice”! It may seem strange. “Rejoice Always”! It’s one of my favorite passages too, which most of you know! And the Apostle goes on! “Let your gentleness be evident to all!” “Do not be anxious about anything”! Are you serious? Have you driven through Traverse City traffic lately? Or worse, traveled downstate? And Zephaniah, roughly six hundred and fifty years earlier, tells us to, “Sing! Shout out loud! Be glad and rejoice with all of your heart!” And look at how both of these are written. They are not merely suggestions, are they? They are actually commands! Commands from the Word of God! “Rejoice! Be Glad! Shout for joy!”

So, how come so many Christians are feeling overwhelmed these days? Why do you think that is? I understand people in general. But why Believers? And why do the Holidays, the very season of expecting Jesus to step into our world at any moment, bring this “Stress Stew” to “Rolling Boil”? Why does the answer to, “How are you doing”, usually include words like “Crazy” or “Hectic”, “Busy” or “Frazzled”? And why, when you dig deeper, do you sometimes hear words like “Worried,” or “Scared”?

“The stress of my job is killing me! Or, “The stress of not having a job is killing me!” “I keep running out money, before I run out of month!” “My grandson can’t seem to get it together!” “The Doctor just called with a bad report!” “What’s going on at the southern boarder?” “How will we ever pay for a thirty trillion-dollar debt?” Or, “How will we pay for the Christmas presents we just bought?” “Why is there so much violence in the streets? In our schools? In our homes?”

It's quite common, isn't it? Anxiety and Stress are everywhere! Now throw in words like COVID, or Omicron, mandates or inflation! How does all that make you feel? And if you are not convinced that stress is real, look around at all the heads nodding in agreement right now! Better yet, stand in a checkout lane! Walk through a mall! Notice how few smiles you currently see!

The experts tell us that stress is "pervasive", and "contagious"! My wife says, I tend to be a carrier! Amazon tells us they have "stress management tools" and "relaxation techniques", "aroma therapy" and "herbal supplements"! "Just take a vacation", the commercials say! "Get away from it all"! Stress is real, right! And Health experts say we are reaping an unhealthy harvest from our Whirlwind Lifestyles!

A Huffington Post article stated that between 75% and 90% of all doctor visits are "for stress related issues". That seemed high to me. But then another study suggested that 70% to 80% of "all health issues" are either "attributed to" or "exacerbated by" stress. Heart Disease increases 40% with stress. Your chance of an actual Heart Attack goes up by 25%! Your odds of a Stroke increase by over 50% with stress! It's not just Insomnia and Acid Reflux anymore! Stress has now been linked to certain types of Cancer, Migraine Headaches, Arthritis, Auto-Immune Diseases, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Depression, ADD and ADHD! One study even said that over 70 % of all colds and flu are either "psychosomatic or physiological reactions to, everyday stress!"

So, what's the answer? Seriously? How do we, as Christians, cope in such a stressful world, let alone navigate our way through the extra turbulent times during the Holidays? What should we, as Believers do? Again, experts have all kinds of opinions, including getting enough sleep and eating right! But the Apostle Paul says, "Rejoice". And the Prophet Zephaniah tells us to "be glad" and to "shout for joy". And before you reject them out of hand, or write them off as biblical kooks, look at where these Prophetic Voices are, when they offer this advice.

Paul is in jail, facing the immanent likelihood of his own execution! He is possibly alone, either under house arrest, or sitting in a dark and dingy cell, depending on when he pens this letter to the fledgling church at Philippi. He has given up a good job to follow Jesus, as well as a powerful position within the religious establishment. Not to mention a whole lot of money, and power, and prestige! And now, because of the Gospel, he is in a miserable place, waiting to die! And yet, what he says is, Rejoice!

He is writing to a church that he loves—one that he founded and nurtured—a church that is now fraught with strife! The Philippians are a mixed bag of folks, Jewish and non-Jewish Christians alike, all living and working in a Roman colony in what is now part of modern-day Greece. The believers are constantly persecuted by the Roman government, and tenaciously mistreated by the non-Christians around them! Life is anything but fun! And now, on top of all that, the church is starting to fight amongst their selves!

In fact, that's the reason Paul is writing this letter from his cell! News has come to him in prison that the people in the church, the people that he so dearly loves, are starting to create factions. They are taking up sides! Can you imagine! In a church! People are arguing over what they should do, or not do—how they should do it, or not do it—and who should be in charge if they do! Strong, passionate, caring brothers and sisters in Christ, are pulling against each other, instead of pulling together in Christian love! Paul even mentions two of them by name, Euodia and Syntyche, which may be better translated, Odious and Soon-touchy! They just can't get along! To which Paul says, "Rejoice"!

Zephaniah is also in a bad place! He is in the middle of absolute corruption and injustice! The Assyrians have taken over the northern Kingdom of Israel, and now have a heavy hand on the southern Vassal State of Judah. And the religious leaders within the State, described as "idolatrous priests" in verse 1:4—along with the local government officials, "princes, and the king's sons" in 1:8, are completely exploiting the people!

What's worse, the average believer has become totally indifferent to God, or even apathetic to their Faith. They are described as those who think "the Lord will do nothing, either good or bad" in 1:12, complacent, "like wine left on its dregs"! I can tell you, inactivity may be good for aging wine, but it's really bad when applied to Faith! The people are numb to the Presence of God! Or in denial maybe? They rely on wealth, "silver" and "gold" in verse 1:18, or their jobs, commerce, those by the "Fish Gate" and in the "market place" in verse 1:10!

Maybe they have just come to accept God's judgment as their well-deserved plight? You know, the Assyrians taking over the north, or the Babylonians about to take over the south! Maybe they are sure that this is exactly what they deserve! Who knows! In any case, Zephaniah comes on the scene, the first Prophetic Voice in a long time, and tells them, in the middle of all this disaster, to "Be Glad" and to "Rejoice"! How can that be, in the midst of all the stuff? Unless, maybe, that's exactly the point!

Do you remember in Romans 12:2, Paul writing, "Do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"? Did you know that shifting your focus, changing the way you think, can actually change your entire life? Do you realize that "what you dwell on, is what you will dwell in"? It is categorically impossible for someone to both despair and rejoice at the same time. It simply can't be done. It's like trying to smile and frown at the same time. Try it. It doesn't work.

What if Paul is NOT talking about "Rejoicing", as a result of what's going on around you—as an end, in and of itself—but rather, "Rejoicing" as a means of achieving that end? What if he is NOT saying, "Rejoice because of all the wonderful things that are happening right now," or "Rejoice, because your entire life is happy and smooth, stress free"—but rather, "Rejoice," "IN THE LORD," "Always"?

Rejoice, because you are in the Lord, and therefore your sins are forgiven! That's a pretty good reason to celebrate, wouldn't you say? Rejoice because every debt that needs to be paid, has been paid, on the Cross of Calvary!

If you are “IN THE LORD” then you can come to the Father any time! You can cuddle up in His arms! You can bring any problem before Him in prayer. What a great reason to rejoice! There is no need to be anxious about anything, because in every situation you can bring your requests to God! And if you do that, with “Thanksgiving,” if you acknowledge all of the Blessings that you have already received, not to mention those that await you eternally, then you can’t help but “Rejoice”!

Appreciate all that you have! Count your Blessings! Or as my mother-in-law says, alphabetize them! Focus on that, rather than on what you don’t have! Again, what you dwell on, you will dwell in! Rejoice, even in the midst of strife! Or better yet, especially in the midst of strife! Always, in fact! And Almighty God will flood that strife with a Peace that is beyond all human understanding! That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it!

Zephaniah puts it like this: “Daughter of Zion, O’ Israel, Daughter of Jerusalem, The Lord has taken away your punishment! The Lord is with you! The King of Israel is with you! The Lord your God is with you! He will take great delight in you! He will quiet you with his love! He will rejoice over you with singing”!

What God is saying, through a Seventh Century BC Prophet is, “I will rescue the lame! I will gather the scattered! I will give them praise and honor! I will give YOU honor and praise among the peoples of the earth!” Can you think of a better reason to rejoice!

Zephaniah contrasts this with Worshipping “created things”. Again, conforming to the world! He mentions the “starry hosts”, or whatever seems to be “awesome” from where an Apathetic Believer might currently stand. For us, that might be a big house, or great car, the latest technology, or the ultimate vacation! It could be fear or anxiety, or whatever nasty thing lays on the horizon. Where is your focus? That’s the question! What are you Worshipping? In other words, where are you spending your time and money, your energy, your strength? Because that’s what you Worship!

I want that kind of peace, don’t you? If so, the take home today is pretty clear. Dealing with the anxieties of life has nothing to do with what we have or don’t have, what’s happening or not, or what might happen even! It has to do with who you are! Or more to the point, whose you are! Peace is the by-product, the by-product of realizing that we are Brothers and Sisters of Christ Jesus, beloved sons and daughters of Almighty God! And therefore, co-heirs of the Kingdom!

That’s the promise of the Incarnation; that God is with us, and will be forever! That’s the promise of the Manger! The promise of the Cross! The promise of God! The Kingdom of Heaven begins right now! It’s a wonderful message of hope in a lost and hopeless world! There is nothing, absolutely nothing that you can say or do that will defeat God’s ability to get to you, to have His way with you! There is nowhere that you can hide from God’s love, and His desire to embrace you! And what that means is, because you are in Christ Jesus, you not only have a reason to rejoice, but also the power to do so! Always, in fact!

What Paul is saying is, “stop worrying you silly Christians! To do so is to either deny that God cares for you, thus rendering Him a liar—or to deny that God has control of every situation in your life, thus denying Scripture! “Instead,” says Paul, “pray”! And do so “with thanksgiving”! “Stand boldly before the Maker of Heaven and Earth, with joy in your heart, and you will find rest!” “He takes great delight in you,” says Zephaniah. “He will quiet you with his love, and rejoice over you with singing”!

It’s simple really, isn’t it? In the midst of the Whirlwind, stop and picture your Heavenly Father, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, singing, and dancing, and rejoicing, because of you! Picture God, with a smile on His face, delighted to be with you! Rejoicing to be with you! If that image doesn’t put a smile on your face, and cause you to rejoice, I don’t know what will! And all of God’s people said, Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most awesome and Holy God, thank you for calling us together, for gathering us as your people, and for forming us into your Church. Thank you for reaching into our daily lives, and calling us out of our turmoil and stress. Thank you for this hour or so this morning, in which we might re-orient our lives, and re-focus our hearts and minds on you. And thank you Lord, for the infinite blessings that you have poured out upon us, especially those we don't take the time to see!

Lord, we are excited to be your church. We are thrilled to be your witnesses in this time and place. We are happy to be the Body of Christ with its many diverse talents and traits. And we are excited, Lord, to use our gifts to glorify you. We are honored, actually, and proud to be called your people.

So please be with us now as we walk the paths that you have laid out before us. Please guide our steps, so that we will stand where you want us to be. Please illuminate our paths, so that we will see and recognize your Holy Spirit reaching for our hands, and nudging us away from the pitfalls and dangers along the way. Please awaken us to the Blessings Lord, piled so high around us, so that we might truly rejoice in you!

Father, as your people, we claim your Love and your Majesty, and accept the Lordship of your Son Jesus Christ. We trust in your Wisdom and believe in your Strength. So, in Faith, we come before you in prayer. Lord, hear us now as we celebrate our joys together, and as we lay our burdens down at your feet. We lift up.....
Bless us now Lord, and quicken our hearts. Break into our world, and into this moment, and cause us to Rejoice as we pray together the very prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...