

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth
 Sunday, December 15th, 2024
 Rev. Gerry Gallant

Joy
 Third Sunday of Advent
 Zephaniah 3:14-17

Welcome

Announcements

Call to Worship

The Lord, your God, is in your midst.

Let us sing out loud and shout our praises!

God rejoices over you with gladness and renews you with love.

We will rejoice with all our hearts at what the Lord has done!

With joy, draw water from the well of salvation in this time of worship.

God is our salvation; we will trust and have no fear.

Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

God of Joy and Justice,

We will always rejoice in you.

You are our strength and our song.

You gather those who have strayed from you and welcome them back to your side.

You bring healing to those who are broken in body and spirit,

and draw close to those who walk alone.

Through your great love and mercy,

you transform us all into more than we ever thought we could be.

We will trust in you and not be afraid.

With joy, we sing of your glory

and proclaim your saving power to those near and far.

Receive our prayers and praise this day,

for you alone are worthy, God most holy. **Amen.**

Advent Candle Lighting

(JOY) Third Sunday of Advent, Year C December 15, 2024

Reader: Today we light the third candle along with the others we have lit in weeks now past. The first was hope, the second faith, and now we celebrate our joy in Christ.

**This third candle, the candle of joy, is an expression of both our hope and faith.
Even when life is hard and the days are dark, our joy is in the Lord.**

Reader: This Kingdom of God is breaking into our darkness, the light of Christ dispelling our fear. We trust in something more than what our eyes can see, in that which faith holds dear.

God, you gather your people from among all the nations and you replace our shame with gladness. In you we have found our home, our safe place. Our rest in you is our everlasting joy!

Light the third (pink/rose) candle of the Advent wreath.

Children's Hymn

Call to Confession

Prepare the way of the Lord!
Let us make our confession to God.

Prayer of Confession

All knowing God,
We know perfect joy only comes through faith in you,
yet we seek it out in lesser ways.
In search of comfort, we indulge our desires.
In search of love, we hide from our faults.
In search of approval, we spend beyond our means.
Forgive us, O God, for seeking satisfaction in the wrong places.
Help us turn again to you, our true source of joy,
and guide us to discover what is honorable, just, and pleasing in your sight. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

The scriptures say, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." The forgiveness we seek is ours through the grace of Jesus Christ. May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be with you.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One.

**For Thine is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen.**

Hymn #136: "The First Noel" (V 1,2,4,6)

The first Nowell the angel did say
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay,
in fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
on a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Refrain:

Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell!
Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star
shining in the east beyond them far,
and to the earth it gave great light,
and so it continued both day and night. (Refrain)

This star drew nigh to the northwest;
o'er Bethlehem it took its rest;
and there it did both stop and stay
right over the place where Jesus lay. (Refrain)

Then let us all with one accord
sing praises to our heavenly Lord,
that hath made heaven and earth of nought,
and with his blood mankind hath bought. (Refrain)

Responsive Reading

Isaiah 12:2-6

² "Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation."

³ **With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.**

⁴ And you will say in that day:
"Give thanks to the Lord,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ **"Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.**

⁶ **Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,**

for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Anthem (Music Ministry): “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night”

Prayer for illumination
(Congregant Prepared)

Scripture

Zephaniah 3:14-17

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.

The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Fear not, O Zion;
let not your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.

Sermon

Perhaps one of the most vocal opponents of Christianity in the field of Philosophy is Fredrich Nietzsche famous for his quote ‘God is dead’. In fact, he is often referenced by youth today who have taken a basic level philosophy course and want to sound smart as they deny God’s existence.

However, like most people who are trying to look smart, they have pulled a quote out and applied it without ever reading a complete work. It is true that Nietzsche denied God’s existence and struggled with the reasons behind Christianity, but his quote had more to do with his own heart than with God. If they would have bothered to reach deeper into his writings, they would have discovered another quote, one that is a little more profound and applicable to Nietzsche and his relationship with God.

‘If they want me to believe in their God, they’ll have to sing better songs. I could only believe in a God who dances.’

Fredrich Nietzsche

In denying God, Nietzsche had stumbled upon one of the most important aspects of Faith, your view of God determines your relationship with Him.

There are plenty of people in this world who see God like Nietzsche did, as some sort of policeman, off in the distance, waiting to arrest you and punish you the minute that you violate one of his laws. A God of rules and regulations, one who is looking to take all the fun out of life. This is not the kind of God that appeals to them, instead they want a God that gives them to live their life free to do as they wish. The question is, what would have changed if Nietzsche had known the God of the Scriptures and not the image of God he had created in his own sinful mind?

All throughout the Scriptures we are reminded that the Lord is not impersonal and uncaring, he does not want to remain off in the distance watching us, but rather he would prefer to be in a close personal relationship with us. In fact, for those of us who confess him as Lord and Saviour, He is a God who loves us so greatly and is filled with such joy for us, he sings and dances over us!

If only Nietzsche could have known the truth of who God is, he could have been saved. If only he knew that God does sing beautiful songs and that He is a God, that dances. This morning, we are going to discover the Lord's wonderful love in the Scriptures, as we discover a God who is filled with joy as he sings and dances over his people.

Zephaniah 3:14-17

**¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!**

**Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!**

**¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.**

**The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.**

**¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
"Fear not, O Zion;**

let not your hands grow weak.

**¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.**

This little bit of prophecy in the writings of a minor prophet has an incredible message for God's people. It says that the Lord our God will rejoice over his people, he will sing over his people.

In verse 14, we see that this is God speaking to Zion, Israel and Jerusalem. Zion is 'the city of David', the place where King David had built his citadel and palace, the place at which the Ark of the Covenant was stored before it had been brought into the temple which Solomon had built. However, once we get into the New Testament, we see the word Zion used to refer to mean the church of God, all those who worship Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. So, this promise is made to the people of God throughout the Old Testament and New Testament.

God is speaking to his people. If we look at verse 15, we learn that God is wanting to take away the judgement that was brought upon the people by their enemies. To understand what judgement the Scripture is speaking of we need to know a little more about Zephaniah. Zephaniah lived from the year 641 BC to 610 BC, in the days that King Josiah was the King of Judah, and the words that he prophesied were of the future judgement that would fall upon the people of God at the hands of the Babylonians that would take place in roughly 574 BC. The Babylonians would be used to cast judgement on the people of God because of their abandonment of God and God's ways as they conformed to the world around them and began to worship pagan gods and sinful ways.

Zephaniah is speaking of both the judgement that is to come and the yearning that would come for God to deliver them from their captivity in Babylon. In verse 16, Zephaniah uses the phrase '**on that day**', he is speaking of a future time, a time when God through his faithfulness to his people, will deliver him from their captivity. The people of Zion are told, '**let not your hands grow weak**'.

God will sometime send his people through hard times, through times of suffering, for their own good. The book of Hebrews has a New Testament equivalent:

Hebrews 12:12

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Zephaniah was telling Israel that it would experience the chastening of God at the hands of the Babylonians, but that it only lasts a time before they would be purged and return to being God's people; and for this reason, in our suffering the faithful are called to take heart and stand tall knowing that deliverance is assured.

Isaiah 35:3-7 refers to the deliverance that is coming through the Messiah, and in it Israel is encouraged.

Isaiah 35:3-7

**³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.**

⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart,

**“Be strong; fear not!
 Behold, your God
 will come with vengeance,
 with the recompense of God.
 He will come and save you.”**
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
 and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.
 For waters break forth in the wilderness,
 and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
 and the thirsty ground springs of water;
 in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,
 the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Israel would go through a time of suffering, a time of captivity, but its salvation was promised, so they had hope. All Christians need to acknowledge this truth, there will be difficult times in our lives, times of suffering, trials, tribulations and troubles, but we are expected to look up in those times and place our hope in our deliverer, Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to verse 17 of today's Scripture:

Zephaniah 3:17

¹⁷ **The Lord your God is in your midst,
 a mighty one who will save;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness;
 he will quiet you by his love;
 he will exult over you with loud singing.**

It is in this verse, we see God's love for his people and his desire to rescue them from their suffering to a place where He can; rejoice over them, reassure them and calm them with His love and exult over them with song.

What is being described here is all wedding imagery, this is what the bridegroom would do with his bride in ancient times. What is being painted is the beautiful image of what is going through the bridegroom's head as he is on the way to the wedding and the time when he and his love will be united for eternity.

Isaiah 62:5

⁵ **For as a young man marries a young woman,
 so shall your sons marry you,
 and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,**

so shall your God rejoice over you.

Israel was always portrayed as the bride of God. However, she was not always behaving that way herself. The people of God often wandered away from God, giving into worldly ways.

Jeremiah 2:31-32

³¹ And you, O generation, behold the word of the Lord.

**Have I been a wilderness to Israel,
or a land of thick darkness?**

**Why then do my people say, 'We are free,'
we will come no more to you'?**

**³² Can a virgin forget her ornaments,
or a bride her attire?**

**Yet my people have forgotten me
days without number.**

Yet even though God's people were unfaithful, even though they praised false gods and gave into sinful ways, God never stopped loving them, he never stopped pursuing them. Today, the same can be said of the people of Zion, the church, believers in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we are the bride of Christ, we are God's people, and just like the people of Israel, we too often are running away from God and doing our own thing. What we need to understand is that even as we wander away, and even as we sit in times of suffering that God is still pursuing his people, and when he restores us, there is a great deal of rejoicing in heaven, because the bride of Christ is restored.

God wants to rejoice and sing over his people. But what kind of songs will he sing? In psalm 32 we read.

Psalm 32:5-7

**⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah***

**⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.**

**⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah***

When we acknowledge our sinful nature, humble ourselves before God and seek out his forgiveness, he wants to sing songs of deliverance over us. He wants to sing to let us know that

we have had the debt of our sin paid by the blood of Jesus Christ, his judgment will no longer fall upon us.

If you have not humbled yourself, confessed your sins to God and repented you sit under God's judgement still, your sins have not been washed away by the blood of the lamb.

Romans 6:23

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The only way to receive forgiveness and eternal life is to be like King David and confess our sins to the Lord.

1 John 1:9-10

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

When we confess our sin to God, he takes away our judgement and sings songs of deliverance over us, we are surrounded by his voice.

We are passed over in judgement because of Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, who died for our sins and paid the debt we owed. The wages of sin are death, spiritual death, an eternity in the flames of hell separated from God and all of his blessings, but when we acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour, he takes our place. Jesus receives the punishment for our sins, he takes them all fully upon himself, this is why he went to the cross. The Bible teaches us that all we need to do in order to receive God's gift of eternal life is to believe, truly believe, that he died for us, and that he rose from the grave victorious over sin and over death. Jesus Christ died for us because he loved us.

Ephesians 5:25-27

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Jesus Christ loved us so much that he died upon the cross for us so that we might be purified from our sin, have all of our guilty stains removed, so that we could be presented unto Christ as spotless and free of sin on the day of the great wedding ceremony in heaven.

No matter what kind of life we lived here on earth, no matter what sins are in our past, if we have truly accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour confessed our sins and repented on the day of judgement when we stand before the Lord in heaven, he will not see any blemishes, instead he will only see a beautiful bride adorned for her husband. And the bridegroom will

sweep us off our feet and sing us sweet songs of deliverance from judgment. If you hear God's voice calling out to you even in a whisper, I encourage you to listen to his voice, confess your sins and follow him into eternal salvation.

Because the Lord our God wants to sing and rejoice over us. The Hebrew word for 'rejoice' which is used in this Scripture 'yagil (gheel)' is defined as 'to spin around under the influence of any violent emotion' and 'to be glad, to be joyful' or 'to rejoice, cry out, and exalt'. Yagil literally means to 'spin around in joy' God will spin around filled with joy over his people, and we will respond to that joy by spinning around ourselves. What is interesting is that in the other language of the region at the time Aramaic, rejoice and dance are also the same word.

The Jerusalem Bible translates this verse as:

Zephaniah 3:17

3:17 Yahweh your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you by his love; he will dance with shouts of joy for you

God rejoices over his people, especially when the Lost are returned to his fold.

Luke 15:3-8

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

I really do wonder, if Nietzsche did not have his distorted perception of God as an impersonal God of judgement and instead knew him as the Scriptures described him, would his life have ended differently? Our view and understanding of God, determines our relationship with him, this is why Bible believing churches are vital in this world, this is why evangelism is critical in this world, this is why living your life for Christ at all times and in all places is necessary in this world.

Our God is a God that is passionately in love with his people, he wants them all to return to him after they have gone astray, after they have fallen into sin and the ways of this world. Yes, if we fail to return to him, judgement will fall upon us, however, if we run to him, he is ready to bestow his unlimited mercy, compassion and forgiveness upon us. He is waiting to rejoice over us, with the entirety of heaven singing and dancing over the return of one lost sheep.

Our God truly sings beautiful songs, songs of deliverance, he is a God that dances and we need to go out and proclaim that to the world as we walk as the Salt and Light of God's Word in this

community. We need to go forth and invite others to meet the bridegroom and have their sins forgiven by the God of the Scriptures.

Let us pray,

Our High Priest and Shepherd

We thank you with our whole heart,
 O beloved Father,
 for the precious blood of your dear Son,
 which he shed for our sake,
 and by which you daily cleanse, quicken, and sanctify us
 in your holy Church,
 and make us partakers of your divine nature.
 We thank you for the great and unspeakable love,
 though we were not worthy of it,
 when you redeemed us by your own Son,
 who is our High priest and Mediator,
 the true Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep of his flock,
 who now sits on your right hand
 and intercedes for us.
 O good and faithful God, Friend of all mankind,
 give us your grace and your great compassion,
 that we may praise you with your Son and the Holy Spirit
 in every act of our lives evermore.

Amen.

Source: Unknown, attributed to St. Augustine (d. 430)

Hymn #145: "In The Bleak Midwinter" (V 1,2,4)

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan;
 earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
 snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
 in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
 heaven and earth shall welcome him when he comes to reign:
 in the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed the
 Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
 If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
 if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet
 what I can I give him: give my heart.

Invitation to Offering

Offering

Offertory Prayer

(Congregant Prepared)

Closing Hymn #147: “Angels We Have Heard on High” (V 1,3,4)

Angels we have heard on high,
sweetly singing o'er the plains,
and the mountains in reply
echoing their joyous strains.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Come to Bethlehem and see
Christ whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee,
Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

See him in a manger laid,
whom the choirs of angels praise;
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
while our hearts in love we raise.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, our Strength and Salvation,
we come before you with joy and thanksgiving
as the beauty of this season unfolds with starry nights and sparkling snow,
with faces that smile and generosity that grows
even after a long, hard year of pandemic struggles.
With the kindness of your Spirit,
awaken opportunities for understanding to emerge among those who have differed,
and refresh our community and congregation with joyful anticipation
that your gift to us in Christ can change everything.

Tender God,
We delight in the joy you bring into our lives and neighborhoods

through our life together in Christ, and through the love of family and friends.
These gifts have sustained us through stressful times
and we thank you.

We pray for those who are finding it hard to be joyful this year,
remembering those facing illness in spirit, mind, or body,
and those waiting for diagnosis or treatment, as anxiety grows.

We pray for those who are lonely or in mourning,
and all who have been touched by tragedy and violence.

We pray for those searching for work, struggling with rising costs,
worried deeply about their security.

And we pray for those working to bring justice to the discouraged and defeated,
and those doing their best to care for the earth you love, despite the challenges.

Use us to bring to joy to others through our friendship, generosity and understanding.

We offer our prayers in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our hope, our peace, and our
joy. **Amen.**

Benediction

God the Father, who loved the world
so much that he sent his only Son,
give you grace to prepare for eternal life.

God the Son, who comes to us as Redeemer and Judge,
reveal to you the path from darkness to light.

God the Holy Spirit, by whose working
the virgin Mary conceived the Christ,
help you bear the fruits of holiness. **Amen.**