

## December 13, 2009: THE RADICAL NATURE OF JOY

Luke 3:7-18; Zephaniah 3:14-20

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The Advent sermon series this year at the church where I served as an intern is about “what we can learn from the bad guys of Christmas.” Each week features a different bad guy. Maybe you can guess who they are: Ebenezer Scrooge, Martha Stewart, Herod the King, and the Grinch who stole Christmas. The names evoke characters familiar to us. Ebenezer Scrooge, seemingly incapable of joy or love, focused as he is on financial gain. Martha Stewart, whose obsessive drive to create makes accomplishing Christmas into a competitive exercise in earning love. Herod the King, the murderous ruler so threatened by the new baby king (Jesus) that he kills all the boy babies in Bethlehem. The Grinch who stole Christmas, so small-hearted about others’ joy in community, that he thinks to steal it. I’m not exactly sure where the preacher is going in this series, but what I wonder is whether he asks people to locate themselves in the parade of bad guys. Scrooge, Martha, Herod, the Grinch. Who are *you*? Ought we to consider that “there is that of Scrooge/Martha/Herod/Grinch” in all of us?

We’ve been following the Advent lectionary texts this season, which can be confusing in this season of shopping, Muzak carols, and high anticipation. The first two weeks of Advent have been all about dread and judgment. Isn’t it about time for a little “rejoice” in our pre-Christmas preaching? The lectionary committee claims to offer that this week, but I have a little trouble calling John the Baptist’s sermon about judgment appropriate for the day called “Joy Sunday.” Where’s the joy in “brood of vipers” and “flee the wrath”? John’s sermon is predictable—share, be fair, don’t bully—but what makes it distinctive is that while he urges his hearers to buck the system, he also tells them to “serve where you are.” Distinctive, but still not joyful, unless you pair it with Zephaniah, where we hear, “God is *for* us.”

If you were here last week, you might remember that we unpacked judgment by wondering where God is when bad things happen. I proposed a progression of the normal questions people ask in hard circumstances: Why me? What for? Now what? Zephaniah suggests that God does indeed answer those questions. Not like a human parent, who might be inclined to respond, “Because I said so.” God is likely to respond to our questions with “Wait” and “I’m with you” and “For redemption.” Last week I said, “When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news.”<sup>1</sup> I still think that’s true, but this week I would also add that, while there may be judgment, we can expect joy.

“Expect joy” is an odd conclusion to John’s hellfire and brimstone, unless one takes into account Zephaniah’s understanding that, for Israel, judgment meant victory over her enemies. If the Baptizer were here, he might be willing to use those Christmas bad guys to judge us, to unveil the lies we live by. And we can bear it, because we’ll have Zephaniah reminding us that God says, “I am *with* you.” Scrooge’s abiding notion of scarcity, Martha’s organizing motive that we’ve got to accomplish it if we’re going to be loved, Herod’s lust for power that can’t conceive of sharing it with others, and the Grinch’s nasty spoiler, “If I can’t have it, no one can.” Wouldn’t John have a heyday with that?

Thank God that into today’s stew of judgment, Zephaniah says, “Fear not.” Fear not? Why not? For Zephaniah, it’s because “the king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst” (3:15). The basis for expecting joy is that *this* king, this Messiah for whom we hope, this particular king “*will not leave*.” And because this God-king sticks around, God’s people do not need to fear disaster.<sup>2</sup> More than “Fear not,” it is, indeed, “Expect joy”! The good news is that this king is also “the King of

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), Luther Seminary

love,” who wills to save us and clean up our acts and transform us and create a new people who can trust and celebrate his reign with all their hearts.<sup>3</sup> Expect joy. And then *do* it.

There’s a curious thing going on in the Zephaniah passage today. The visual image is that of carnival, and it’s a carnival in which it is God who is rejoicing and exulting over the people. On this day of Joy Sunday, there’s a little confusion over who is rejoicing over whom. Apparently, it’s not just we humans who rejoice over the coming Messiah, it is God who rejoices over us. *This* is what happens when God saves, when God is worshiped and is no longer at war with the covenant people. Expect joy! God keeps the promises in Zephaniah, the promises of presence and triumph over our enemies. *But* (and this is from 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher C.H. Spurgeon), “The fulfillment of a divine promise is not the exhaustion of it. When [humans make] a promise, and [keep] it, there is an end of the promise, but it is not so with God. When [God] keeps His word to the full, He has but begun. He is prepared to keep it, and keep it, and keep it for ever and ever”<sup>4</sup>

That’s the reason to expect joy, friends. The good news is that God wins. Our enemies have already been defeated. Scrooge’s lie that “I’ve gotta get mine and keep others from getting any, otherwise there won’t be enough for *me*.” Martha’s lie that “If I’m going to be loved, I’ve gotta accomplish it and earn it.” Herod’s lie that “Power and prestige are more important than anything, and I’m entitled to destroy anyone who threatens my power.” The Grinch’s lie that “If I can’t enjoy something, nobody else should, either, even if it ruins the community.”

These are lies, friends. Because our God is never done keeping the promise to save and to be *with* us, we are not bound by those lies. They have no power over us. We can expect joy. As we come to writing on the spirals today, consider what gives you joy. And how that joy invites you to experience God rejoicing over you.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Interpretation: Nahum—Malachi*

<sup>4</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “A Sermon for the Time Present,” quoted p. 87 in Achtemeier