

Rejoice!

Zephaniah 3: 14-20, Philippians 4: 4-7

Rejoice! Place after place in Bible tells people to rejoice. Here at Crossroads Church, our worship songs tell us to rejoice, be joyful, sing for joy, and act joyful! In some ways, I'm reminded of the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy".

What do you do when someone tells you to be happy? Do you try to feel and act joyful? Do you do just the opposite and feel anything but joyful? When the Bible tells us to sing and rejoice, it's talking about the overflow of joy from within.

When have you rejoiced. When have you been so joyful that it just overflowed in songs and expressions of joy? What brings you joy that strong? What causes joy that profound?

What about the other side? When have you experienced sorrow, heartache of the same intensity as the joy? Sometimes, the source of our greatest joys and of our greatest sorrows are the same. These emotions are often the result of our deepest commitments and our most intense relationships. Biblically speaking, the call to rejoice is not a call to act, not to pretend. It is, rather, to be outward with something, an emotion, from deep within. Now, I'm in favor of joy, but I also have some questions. It's good to be joyful and to want people to be happy, but why have such strong admonitions to rejoice? Why is the act of rejoicing so important that we see place after place in the Bible virtually commanding us to do so? Why is it so important in our worship that we rejoice? Is it just to feel good or is there more?

The scripture reading from the book of the prophet Zephaniah depicts the celebration of God's commitment to the people of Israel who are languishing in exile. In this passage, the prophet is telling the people to rejoice in God – to "sing" and "raise the rafters".

He paints a word picture of the ultimate hope of the Jewish. Zephaniah was writing at the time of the exile of the northern Kingdom Israel following their crushing defeat at the hands of the Assyrian Empire. He calls these broken and defeated people to rejoice in the faith that God will act as in the Exodus and bring them freedom, redemption, and hope. Sing for joy in the promised restoration of the land. Rejoice that the people of Israel will be justified in the eyes of the world powers for their dogged faith.

Rejoicing is the act of committing yourself. Here's an example. A sports fan knows both misery and joy. The deep joy in being a fan comes only by fully committing to a team. Casual fans are spared the misery, but they also miss the depth of joy. Zephaniah calls to people to rejoice as a sign of their commitment to God.

Christmas means many things. Perhaps most important, it is the symbol of God's full commitment to humanity -- God with us. We know that there are different ways of talking about and understanding the nature of God. The rich language of the New Testament is very personal and very anthropomorphic concerning God. Even as we expand our understandings in this regard, God as ultimate reality, let's be careful not to lose a personal sense of that reality – personal in relationship with persons.

The underlying, overarching reality of the universe is moving toward us, coming to us, loving us. That's the message of Christmas. This message challenges each of us to take our stand, to commit to fully serving God whose nature was clearly revealed in the life of Jesus. Let us answer the call to rejoice, to be joyful at this holy season of Christmas. Let us stand with our full weight on the ground walked by Jesus. As we worship, let us also follow this God who sings with the voices angels – "Peace on earth".

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church, expressing his love for them, and saying that it was time for them to live their commitment of faith in God. He was essentially commanding them to rejoice. He insisted “Again, rejoice!”

He was calling for more than happiness and much more than a pep rally for Jesus. “Rejoice!” is the instruction commit, to set our feet on the floor and rest by faith in God as revealed in Jesus. Henri Nouwen was a contemplative Christian who wrote this:

Joy and gratitude are the qualities of the heart by which we recognize those who are committed to a life of service in the path of Jesus. We see this in families where parents and children are attentive to one another’s needs and spend time together despite many outside pressures. We see it in those who always have room for a stranger, an extra plate for a visitor, time for someone in need. We see it in the students who work with the elderly, and in the many men and women who offer money, time, and energy for those who are hungry, in prison, sick, or dying. Where we see real service we also see joy because, in the midst of service, a divine presence becomes visible and a gift is offered. Therefore, those who serve as followers of Jesus discover that they are receiving more than they are giving. Just as a mother does not need to be rewarded for the attention she pays to her child, because her child is her joy, so those who serve their neighbor will find their reward in the people whom they serve.

The joy of those who follow [Jesus] on his self-emptying and humbling way shows that what they seek is not misery and pain, but the God whose compassion they have felt in their own lives. Their eyes do not focus on poverty and misery, but on the face of the loving God. (Henri Nouwen, et al, *Compassion*)

The God whose coming among us and in us we celebrate at Christmas calls each of us, calls us as a community, to lives of service. There is joy at Christmas. There is *Joy to the world!* But we won’t find it in the stores, as much fun as all the stuff can be. Joy is in the manger of Bethlehem and all the forgotten places of the world today.

We come to Bethlehem for the same reason we sing familiar hymns, Christmas carols, and praise songs. The Christmas story grounds our lives and connects us to our past. It provides a solid foundation for our lives and is a great source for comfort -- even joy. The tradition balances all our questions. It doesn’t silence our questioning, but balances it with angels’ songs: *Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth.*

Come to Bethlehem. When we find Jesus, we will see the suffering and shame, the sorrow and pain around us. When come on bended knee, like the shepherds and wise men, we’ll embrace the hurt, the sorrow, and the shame within ourselves as well. By seeing the sorrow of others and embracing it in ourselves, we will lay it down at the manger and we will rise up and go out with joy! Come, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass that the angels have made known to us. Let us go. Let us sing. Let us rejoice!