

## Kingdom Singing

[Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 2:8-14](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, December 12, 1999

On this third Sunday of Advent, I am continuing in a series of sermons focused on how the coming of Christ fulfills our old longings. We have looked at the longing for justice and peace. Today we turn our attention to the longing for joy. \*\*\* It had been seventy-five years since Isaiah promised that a virgin would have a child, and he would be called God with us. Of his kingdom in Judah there would be no end. He would be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

It was a great vision. Only after seventy-five years, the people got tired of waiting for this new king and his wonderful new kingdom. Meanwhile, Judah had a couple of terrible kings who took advantage of the people's discouragement and returned them to idolatry. King Manasseh even sacrificed his own son to one of these idols.

We are always most susceptible to an idol in our life when we have been disappointed by God. You pray and pray for God to help, but the help still doesn't come. So the temptation is great to look for help from your money, or your health, or your job. These idols are much more manageable than the Lord Yahweh. They make great promises, and are so wonderfully immediate - no waiting. The Bible claims that idols are powerful. They don't really have the power to make you joyful. But as King Manasseh discovered, they do have the power to take away your children and loved ones. Just turn your job into an idol, and you'll understand what the Bible means by that.

But God knew the reason his people bowed before graven images was that they became complacent about hoping for the Messiah, telling themselves, "The Lord will not do good. Neither will he do harm." This comfortable despair actually seems to bother God even more than the idolatry. After all the people had seen and heard, how could they become complacent about God? But we have seen even more than the people of Judah saw. So I wonder if we are not in even more danger than they. On this side of Christmas we have heard about his coming in the birth of Jesus Christ. We heard that the virgin did conceive and bear a son, and that Emmanuel is with us. Year after year we hear that story. So how do we dare tell ourselves that God will neither do us good or harm?

You cannot pretend to be unaffected by Christmas or to think this news does not change your story. The shepherds knew that from the beginning. After the angel made the great announcement that a savior had been born to us, and after the heavenly host then began to sing Glory to God in the highest, the angels went away. The sky went dark, and the story places a single spotlight on the shepherds. Now they have to decide what they are going to do about this. They couldn't shrug their shoulders and say, "that was nice." No, they had to go and see what had been told to them.

There is no neutral after Christmas. God will not tolerate it. You can reject the Christmas message, and you can certainly continue the pilgrimage to Bethlehem to find our Savior. But God will not tolerate any of us shrugging our shoulders, saying so what? He will never settle for indifference. In Dante's Inferno there is a special circle in hell for those who lived with neither infamy or praise. God has always preferred hot or cold, but the lukewarm he just has to spew out of his mouth.

So in response to this indifference, God raised up another prophet named Zephaniah. In the opening chapters of his prophecy, Zephaniah depicts God as a night watchman who walks through the streets of Jerusalem with a lamp, searching for those who have settled into their complacent despair and practical atheism - pretending as if God will not intervene. Here Zephaniah joins a long line of prophets who warn the people about the approach of God. "Look out for God," they cautioned. "Because when he gets here, it's going to be judgment day."

But then the story takes a strange turn. By grace, on his way to find us, the Lord chose to set aside his judgment and come to us with joy. That's because he was so delighted simply to find us. Now we come to our text today that begins, "Shout aloud, O daughter Zion; shout O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem. The Lord has taken away his judgments against you...The King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst." Why is Christmas such good news? Because in the birth of Jesus, the Lord God was in our midst, and he didn't kill us! If you are not absolutely overwhelmed by Christmas, you are not reading the story carefully enough.

The latest issue of Christianity Today includes a wonderful poem by John Sea, titled, "Sharon's Christmas Prayer." She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them with slow solemnity, convinced every word was revelation. She said, "They were so poor they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat. And they went a long way from home without getting lost. The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside the lady. They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass. (hee-hee) But the Three Rich Men found them because a star lited the roof. Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them. Then the baby was borned. And do you know who he was?" Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars. "The baby was God." And she jumped in the air, whirled round, dove into the sofa, and buried her head under the cushion. Which is the only proper response to the Good News of the Incarnation.

Children have always been better at understanding Christmas than the rest of us. They know that Christmas is about receiving, while we adults have gotten confused thinking it's all about giving. According to the story, God was the only one giving on the night Jesus was born. And what he gave was himself. Children also know that when you look at something so holy, or tell the most embarrassingly special part of the story, the only appropriate response is to dive for the sofa cushions.

The embarrassingly special part of the story is that God is so excited just to find you that he forgets all about his anger at your idolatry and indifference. And according to Zephaniah, God starts singing. Loudly. He sings in exultation, which is the stand up and really-let-it-rip kind of singing. Not even God can stay seated at Christmas, because he is delirious with joy! You have been found.

So it is not surprising that on the first Christmas Eve when the shepherds are watching their flocks by night and an angel announces that God is now with us, that the heavenly host break out in song. Maybe the shepherds did not know this was a fulfillment of Zephaniah's promise, but Luke certainly did. He includes the song of the heavenly host to make the point clear.

I have devoted my life to words. I believe that words put together carefully can do a world of good. But like any one who strives to know his craft well, I'm aware of the limits of words. For example, music can carry a message far beyond the limits of the spoken or written word. That is why God created it. So many times Michael Denham, our Minister of Music, and I work together to lead funerals, weddings, and the Wednesday Eucharist. In the homily, I will try to speak the word of the Lord as carefully as I can, and the congregation will nod their heads, and say, "Yeah, I think that's right." But when Michael sings the same words, that is when the tears begin to flow, because the music can carry the words deeper into the heart.

God can't just show up on Christmas Eve without singing, because he wants to get the joy all the way into the darkest corner of our hearts. So to really understand Christmas, you have to hear the song. It's the only way to really get the joy. And until you get the joy, you'll keep settling to be something you are not.

In India, they tell the fable of a tiger cub who lost his mother and was adopted by a family of goats. The goats raised the tiger to speak their language, adopt their ways, and eat their food. Soon the tiger believed he was just a funny looking goat. One day a king tiger appeared and all the goats scattered in fear. Except the young tiger who was left alone, afraid, and yet somehow unafraid. The king tiger asked him what was meant by this masquerade. But all the young tiger could do was bleat nervously and eat grass. So the king carried him to a pool, and forced the young tiger to look at their reflected images. Side by side, the truth became clear in their reflected images. Lashing his tail, and digging his claws in the ground, the young beast finally raised his head high. And the jungle trembled at the sound of his exultant roar.

It doesn't take a prophet to know that humans have become less than we were created to be. Like Adam, we have all lost paradise. But we still carry around the longing for it in our hearts, while we settle for being so much less. Well, the calling of the church is not to help you cope with your life as a goat, or to make you content with your own piece of turf, or to dress the goat up like a Pharisee. No, the church's calling is to help you discover your true image in the king born among us.

He lived with us as one fully alive. Nothing escaped him in life. Not the dead sparrow, the children who try to sneak onto his lap, the woman who touched the hem of his clothes, the lame, the blind, the hungry, the sinner all made him stop. So maybe the most embarrassing part of the story is that the contrast between his life and our goat-like lives is so great that we have to either crucify this king tiger or we have to change.

So how do we change? If Jesus is just an example, he is a curse, because the example is too great. But if he really is the God with us, then in his arrival we see the image of God in our own lives. As we embrace this Savior the image comes alive in our own hearts. Jesus restores our dignity by forgiving us for settling for the goat, so that we can spend the rest of life expressing gratitude and roaring with delight.

This joy in our lives comes not from rearranging our lives as goats, but from discovering our true identities in Jesus Christ as the beloved children of heaven. If you can't sing the joy this year, or if you can't roar a little with delight, it is only because you have yet to look close enough at the Savior Jesus and you, side by side, to find the image of our one Father.

Don't let us miss the heavenly song this year, Dear God. Lift up our heads, and our hearts, that we may join the angels, and the archangels, and even your own voice, in proclaiming joy to the world. Amen.