

Advent Sermon Series: Advent: God's Gift of New Hope
Sermon Title: Hope Brings Joy
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
Salem United Methodist Church; December 9, 2018
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Holiday cheer seems to be all around us. And in the church we are listening to prophets who call us names. There seems to be a disconnect between the church and how we celebrate Christmas. Is the church out of step with the world? Or is the church calling us to rethink what is really important? This is my hope.

One of my favorite Christmas movies is "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Charlie Brown is depressed despite of all the Christmas traditions that are supposed to bring joy- the Christmas presents, Christmas cards, decorations, and all of the commercialism. Everyone seems to have the holiday Spirit except Charlie Brown. Lucy finds joy in the money she is earning from her psychiatric booth. Snoopy enters his decorated dog house into a contest with the hope of receiving the cash prize. And his sister, Sally, wants him to write a letter to Santa. She has a long list of wants, but says she will accept large sums of money instead. All this drives Charlie Brown deeper into his depression. Lucy suggests that he should direct the neighborhood play which might get him out of his bad mood. But everyone has their own ideas about the play. They want jazzy music to dance to, a Christmas queen and penguins alongside the innkeepers and shepherds. They criticize all of Charlie Brown's ideas. Lucy suggests that the play needs a Christmas tree and tells Charlie Brown to get a big shiny pink aluminum one. Instead, Charlie Brown picks out a tiny sapling and is scorned by Lucy and everyone laughs at his choice of tree. At his wit's end, Charlie Brown cries out, "Does anyone know what Christmas is all about?"

Charlie Brown reminds me of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness. John did not have Christmas on the brain. In fact, Jesus was in his young adult years when John began his ministry. But like Charlie Brown, John the Baptist seems to be at his wit's end when he cries out, "You brood of vipers! You children of snakes!" Not the best opening for a sermon, but it got the people's attention! Sometimes we can talk and talk and talk, but no one pays attention until we shout something at them. Being called snakes would have stopped the people in their tracks. They associated snakes with the snake in the garden who tempted Adam and Eve. They would have wanted to dissociate themselves from this snake. So they stop and listen to John's message of judgement. John says, "If you don't produce good fruit or do what is right you will be destroyed, chopped down and burned." Yes, this is what prophets do. They call people to get right with God. In the beginning of the book of Zephaniah, he is preaching total destruction if the people don't get right with God. John had a little more success than earlier prophets. The people actually listened to John and ask, "What then shall we do?" This question must have been music to John's ears. There is hope for these people. They want to know how to remedy their situation. The people want to be prepared. "What then shall we do?"

John's advice is simple, yet challenging. Don't be selfish. Share what you have with others. Keep no more than you need. Be fair. Treat others with care. And be honest. In other words, love you neighbor as you love yourself. In this crowd who came to hear John there are two distinct groups of people that the author of the Gospel of Luke chooses. These two groups are two of the most despised people of the time: tax collectors and soldiers. These are Roman soldiers who enforced the Roman authority as Rome occupied the nation of Israel. The soldiers were the authority in the area. They would not only threaten the people, but they would take whatever they wanted from the people. The tax collectors were neighbors who were hired by the Roman government collect the tax, however they were given free rein to extort more money than the tax from the people. Both the tax collectors and the soldiers held power over the people. Yet, they listen to John and his words cut straight to their hearts and both groups ask, "What about us? What should we do?" Both groups want to change. To the tax collector he says, "Collect no more than is authorized to collect." Be fair in your dealings. Don't be greedy and steal from the poor. To the soldiers he says, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay." Again, don't be greedy and be fair. These are words to live by.

During this time of the year, we are more conscious of being fair and being generous. We are more conscious of reaching out to the lonely, to those who are hurting, to those who are in need, to those who are ill,

and to those who are in need. The food banks shelves are overflowing. Various organizations collect toys for children in need. Homeless shelters are inundated with winter coats and blankets. People seem to care more for others. We tend to be nicer to each other. And we may even be quicker to forgive or do what is right. As we are more mindful of being fair and generous, we experience the joy of the giving.

Joy is more than being happy, even more than the pursuit of happiness. Joy supersedes happiness. Joy is not about achieving pleasure or avoiding pain. Joy comes in the pursuit of doing God's will. If those asked John the Baptist, "What then shall we do?" went and did what John said then they experienced joy. We experience joy when it is shared. The Apostle Paul mentions this in his letter to the church at Philippi. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." The Lord is near when we share our material things, our gentleness, and our joy. Could this be one of the reasons our society begins celebrating Christmas earlier and earlier? Are we searching for this joy? Do we have a deep longing for the hope, the peace, and the joy we receive when the Lord is near, when the Lord is with us?

We forget that this hope, peace, and joy can be with us every moment of every day. One grandmother didn't know that she could have hope, peace, and joy even though she attended church for many years. The message she heard every Sunday was that she wasn't good enough for God. She was told that she was a sinner and she was to stay away from all the things she wasn't supposed to do. No matter how much she tried she couldn't meet the standards of being free of sin. Every Sunday she walked away from church depressed, feeling like a failure. Then she was invited to a church where she was told she was loved just the way she was. She heard the message of grace and hope. She began to experience joy for the first time. So she switched churches. When she was asked why she switched, she stated, "I never knew God was a God of Joy until now."

Rejoice! Both Zephaniah and the Apostle Paul who were separated by about 700 years tell us to rejoice. For Zephaniah we are to rejoice because God loves us. God is with us. God wants to renew us in his love. God cares for us. We have nothing to fear. God will save us. So have hope and rejoice! This is the great, YES! For Paul, our joy comes when we put our whole trust in God, when we hand over our anxieties and anxiousness. This sounds a little like making a Christmas list for Santa. If we make a list of all our worries and concerns and pray, then God will answer them. This is not exactly what Paul meant. Prayer not only reshapes our anxieties, but also reshapes how we view them. Through prayer we realize God's great omnipotence, and we are humbled that God would care about us and we become thankful. Through prayer we may find the answer, but through the process we are changed. Our worries may not seem as important as before, and/or we come away with a sense of gratitude for all God has done and is doing. We can let go of the worries and trust that God will find a way. With this sense of trust comes a sense of peace and joy. Through prayer we connect with God and experience joy as we realize how great and good God is. Through prayer we can receive the peace of God that the human intellect cannot comprehend.

We seek peace during the Advent, yet the cacophony of the season can drown out voice that reminds us that we are a family of snakes when we get caught up in the festivities and forget as Charlie Brown asked, "Does anyone know what Christmas is all about?"

Do you remember how the Charlie Brown Christmas story ends? The least likely character, Linus, the one who is picked on and carries a security blanket tells the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. He reads, "And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Rejoice, daughters and sons! Rejoice in the Lord during Advent, Christmas and always! Rejoice! For this Savior is our new hope for today and for all of our tomorrows.

Prayer: Let the hope you have given us, Eternal God, fill our hearts with joy as we remember your mighty acts in ages past and as we look forward with new hope to the day when you will fill all human hearts with the knowledge of your redeeming power. Enable us to hear your word of hope and peace and help us respond with a new hope and an even greater joy. Amen.

Resources: *Advent: The Gift of New Hope* by Christopher Webber; *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.;

