

3 Advent – Year C – December 16, 2009 Homily
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
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Sing the praises of the Lord. Cry aloud, ring out your joy. So says Isaiah. There are actually over five hundred and fifty references to song, sing and praise in the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, and most frequently in the Psalms. If we were to take the advice of Scripture seriously that would average out to singing praises to God at least once every day of the year, and often twice. So why are we so shy about this? One commentator actually noted that singing prowess was not required by God – the prophet tells us to “cry aloud”, make that joyful noise, even if our personal aptitude for singing is not what we consider choir standard!

Beethoven composed the tune to the *Hymn to Joy* after he became deaf and could only experience the vibrations of the melody, and hear the song in his head. According to *The Hymnal 1982*, Henry Van Dyke wrote the words. They form a nice interplay for our consideration of this evening’s canticle, otherwise known as the first song of Isaiah. Here is the first verse of the hymn: “Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love; hearts unfold like flowers before thee, praising thee, their sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away; giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.” Verse two of Canticle 9 reads, “Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior.” Both speak of freedom from fear and both sing praises to God for His steadfast love and the promise of divine salvation. Contextually in the time of the prophet Isaiah, the salvation that the people are singing of is one of national consequence from political and physical exile. For you and me, we hear instead the power of the Holy Spirit working the miracle of God’s spiritual transformation in the gift of salvation through Christ, our Lord.

In the second verse of the hymn, Van Dyke celebrates all of God’s creation as a reflection of God’s glory, and a reason for you and I to celebrate God’s love and all God’s good gifts. The comparable passage of the Canticle is verse 5, “Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, and this is known in all the world.” As Paul would say many years later, we are without excuse in feigning ignorance of God’s hand in creation. Similarly, when it comes to the evidence of God’s love, care and presence in the world around us. There are at least three important aspects of singing God’s praises here. The first is the simple attitude of gratitude that keeps us focused on God’s will, which we can share with all our neighbors. Being grateful to God in all things is a great way to introduce others to God in Christ Jesus; to remind us, and to help others to look beyond self. This is how God’s great deeds become known in all the world. The free and gracious gift of salvation is available to all. Gratitude is also manifest in actions that stem from acknowledging that we are stewards of God’s creation. When we truly appreciate that gift of God’s grace by thanking God for all the beauty of the world, we become more aware of our responsibility as God’s stewards, and are much more likely to treat the earth’s resources with due respect. Then there is the repetitive ritual of singing songs of praise. How many of us went to Sunday school and learned about the Good News through songs like, *This Little Light of Mine*, or *Jesus Loves Me*? Rituals or habits are an important part of our lives. Some are potentially destructive like habitual drug use, and others like singing God’s praises are rituals that shape who we are as God’s precious children. One of the reasons that most of us love the liturgy of the Episcopal

and Lutheran traditions so much is that it has a comforting and familiar rhythm to it that transcends the mundane, and draws us into the mystery of God's presence.

The third verse of the hymn of praise to God reads, "Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest, wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest! Thou our Father, Christ our Brother; all who live in love are thine; teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine." Similarly, verse three of the Canticle says, "you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation." Setting aside fear, and putting our trust in the Lord, we can anticipate and celebrate God's promises, and a glorious homecoming. This portion of Isaiah is flowing with water references. Our joy springs from the knowledge of God's presence and favor. As our joy in God's constancy and steadfast love progresses, we respond with sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. God's grace is not a one-time event, but an ongoing gift to be enjoyed. For you and I, the springs of salvation represent God's power, love and care. For the Israelites, drawing water may have been an actual ritual celebrating God's gift of life-sustaining wells and springs, or a way to describe God as the fountain of living water. Jesus describes Himself as living water to the Samaritan woman at the well, and later to the crowd he says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38). This tells us that Jesus the divine source of living water. It also tells us that He has the power to bless those who believe in Him with constant access to the unending rivers of life, which in turn we share with others.

Ultimately, the implications of stewardship, individual formation and spiritual transformation form a great swell, a tidal wave of joy in the Lord. As we gather together and sing praises to the Lord, as we worship in community, our individual joy becomes a communal response of thanksgiving, and a responsibility to "make [God's] deeds known among the peoples." This then is one way we learn to love each other, as God loves us, and experience divine joy. One final thought from Samuel Dickey Gordon, "Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross. It is an unknown word and thing except as He has sway within."

Let us sing out God's praises, with all the company of heaven! Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.
Amen.