



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – December 23, 2007

What We Most Want For Christmas  
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

## Zephaniah 3:14-20

*A Song of Joy*

<sup>14</sup> *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!*

<sup>15</sup> *The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,  
he has turned away your enemies.*

*The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall fear disaster no more.*

<sup>16</sup> *On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
Do not fear, O Zion;*

*do not let your hands grow weak.*

<sup>17</sup> *The LORD, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;*

*he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you<sup>d</sup> in his love;*

*he will exult over you with loud singing*

<sup>18</sup> *as on a day of festival.<sup>e</sup>*

*I will remove disaster from you,<sup>f</sup>*

*so that you will not bear reproach for it.*

<sup>19</sup> *I will deal with all your oppressors  
at that time.*

*And I will save the lame*

*and gather the outcast,*

*and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.*

<sup>20</sup> *At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;*

*for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,*

*when I restore your fortunes*

*before your eyes, says the LORD.*

## Luke 2:8-14 [King James Version]

<sup>8</sup> *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the  
field, keeping watch<sup>d</sup> over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And, lo, the  
angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord*

<sup>d</sup> Gk Syr: Heb *he will be silent*

<sup>e</sup> Gk Syr: Meaning of Heb uncertain

<sup>f</sup> Cn: Heb *I will remove from you; they were*

<sup>d</sup> watch: or, the night watches

*shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. <sup>10</sup> And the  
angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good  
tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is  
born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the  
Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe  
wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. <sup>13</sup> And suddenly  
there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising  
God, and saying, <sup>14</sup> Glory to God in the highest, and on earth  
peace, good will toward men. <sup>15</sup> And it came to pass, as the angels  
were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds<sup>g</sup> said one to  
another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing  
which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.  
<sup>16</sup> And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and  
the babe lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup> And when they had seen it, they  
made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning  
this child. <sup>18</sup> And all they that heard it wondered at those things  
which were told them by the shepherds. <sup>19</sup> But Mary kept all these  
things, and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> And the shepherds  
returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they  
had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.*

I have a Christmas present for you. It's the present every minister wishes he could give his congregation; it's the present we all wish we could give each other; it's the present we most want this season. Certainly, it's the present God most wants to give you. And God went considerably further than the local mall to get it for you. The present is joy.:

For hundreds of years God sent prophets like Zephaniah preparing Israel to “Rejoice and exult with all your heart!” [Zephaniah 3:14] God’s messenger stirs Mary to sing out, “my spirit rejoices in God my savior!” [Luke 1:46] God’s angel appears to the shepherds saying, “Fear not, for behold I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.” [Luke 2:10] Finally, God comes to us as a babe in a manger, as Jesus the Christ, who teaches us to love so that his joy might be in us, and that our joy may be complete. [John 15:11].

So, here’s our question for this Christmas Sunday, 2007: if joy is what we most want for ourselves, what we most

<sup>e</sup> the shepherds: Gr. the men the shepherds

want for our loved ones, what God most wants to give us, then do we experience it? Do we, do you and I, rejoice and exult with all our hearts this morning?

Well, the glib answer is: "Of course!" Snowy village, white steeple church, Christmas greens, nativity pageant, world premiere anthem, friends and family. What's not to like? But "liking" is not the same as "rejoicing." As C.S. Lewis taught, there is a difference between happiness and joy, between pleasure and joy.<sup>1</sup> And if we want to share joy this Christmas, then it's worth taking a few minutes to parse the difference between joy on the one hand and happiness, or gladness, or contentedness, or even pleasure on the other.

Happiness, or gladness, or contentedness usually depend on our circumstances, on the quality and sometimes even the quantity of our material goods, but joy can thrive even in the midst of privation.<sup>2</sup> Pleasure can be scheduled or even manipulated by using people or things as means for our satisfaction. Joy always surprises; and it comes, if it comes, only when we experience people or objects as valued ends in themselves, as holy creations, and not simply as means for our ends.

Just before being killed by the Nazis, Dutch priest Titus Brandsma smuggled the following note out of Dachau, "I see God in the works of his hands and the marks of his love in every visible thing, and it sometimes happens that I am seized by a supreme joy which is above all other joys."<sup>3</sup>

Pleasure is extinguished by its opposite, pain. But joy can exist side by side with pain, as so many of our elders teach us week by week. The opposite of joy is not pain but sorrow, but even here joy can bloom. You need only recall a memorial service for a loved one to remember how your joy for the beauty of their life mingled with your sorrow for their loss.

Indeed, that's the hallmark distinctive of joy. Joy is possible independent of external circumstances. As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend. "It's an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our

sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. The people are the Christians – and I am one of them."<sup>4</sup>

What exactly is this joy? Where does it come from? What does it feel like? Paul Tillich used words like "union," "reunion" and "communion" to describe joy.<sup>5</sup> The essence of joy is oneness. We experience joy when we are suddenly overwhelmed by an appreciation of our oneness with God, our oneness with a loved one, or our oneness with creation.

Think of a time you exhausted all your strength, all your courage, and fell to your knees in a desperate prayer, only to find a source of calm, a sense that you were in the hands of a greater power that would see you through. God was not distant but as close as your own heart. Oneness. Joy.

Think of a time you were estranged from a loved one. Jaws set, arms folded, grimly silent as your paths crossed. Then haltingly, anxiously, almost grudgingly you blurted out "I'm sorry, I've been acting like a jerk." And, before you could even finish, she interrupted. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I said." A tearful hug. Oneness. Joy.

Think of a time you were out for an early walk and found yourself alone on the beach - the sun just beginning to peak up over the horizon as the shore birds skittered and the waves crested and collapsed. Suddenly all sense of separateness seemed to melt away and you felt only a rightness, an acceptance, a union with all creation. Oneness. Joy.

Our ultimate joy is reunion with the source and end of our being, with our God. That's why the central image of Zephaniah's "Song of Joy" is God in our midst. That's why Gwyneth Walker's anthem sings of the "light of light descendeth." That's why the Angel tells Joseph the baby will be called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." That's why the very essence of the Christmas story is that God reestablishes our oneness by coming to us, by coming amongst us as an irresistible babe in a manger. Joy is heart to heart communion - a reunion of our heart with God's heart, our heart with our neighbor's heart. Oneness.

And, as the essence of Joy is oneness: the oneness of union, reunion and communion, so it follows that the ultimate threats to joy are separation, estrangement, and abandonment - the sources of true sorrow. That's why Zephaniah's God comes to take away all that separates us from God and neighbor, all that blocks our joy: the fear, the anxiety, the judgmentalism, the guilt, the shame, the injustice, the old grudges. That's why John the Baptist asks the people to make a fresh start, to begin letting go of the needy behaviors that separate us one from another and from our God. That's why the very first thing the Angel says to Zechariah, or Mary or the Shepherds is "Fear not!" You see, my friends, the opposite of joy is sorrow, and the root of sorrow is fear, and what is fear but the anxiety, the dread of separation from our God or from our loved ones, or from our community, or even from ourselves.

So again the question. If I had an "emotionometer" that I could lift up like a moistened finger to the wind, what would it pick up this morning?

Some happiness to be sure - happy we managed to get the kids to church on time, happy to see each other, happy little Sarah Mettler made it all the way through her star turn as baby Jesus without requiring an appearance by that dreadful doll.

Some pleasure to be sure: the beauty of green wreaths against white mill work, the familiarity of old Christmas anthems.

Some gaiety to be sure: fresh coffee and old jokes in a crowded coffee hour.

But wouldn't we also pick up a bit of fatigue from trying to get so much done in so little time, a bit of guilt that we hadn't started earlier, a bit of a fear that we won't be a good enough party hoster, gift buyer, meal cooker, card writer, toast master, family welcomer, God worshiper?

Our Christmas traditions provide ample opportunity for both gifts and burdens, for both pleasures and anxieties. And our nativity pageant reminds us that it has been so since the very first night Joseph and Mary stumbled into Bethlehem. After all, they were running late, and the town was crowded, and there was no

room in the inn. Talk about a set up for guilt and blame!

Lidabell used to tell a story about the pageant where little third graders Mary and Joseph confronted a rather stern looking innkeeper. The little red-headed innkeeper studied Mary and Joseph carefully and repeated his line, "there is no room in the inn." "But my wife is pregnant!" Joseph replied.

At which point the innkeeper veered from the script and said, "Well, it's not my fault!" To which Joseph replied, "Well, it's not my fault either!"

Our Christmas traditions have always been a mixed stocking of familiar delights and frazzled expectations. But what about joy and what about us? Would our emotionometer pick up joy this morning? Surely for some of us, some of the time, the answer would be yes. But I'm guessing for most of us, myself included, the joy pulse would be weak. And no wonder! The fatigue, the guilt, the anxiety, the fears of the season are all recipes for closed hearts, for grim sets to our jaws, for eyes so glued to to-do lists that we wouldn't see a joyful communion coming if it smacked us with a two by four.

I've heard stories that in Borneo they capture monkeys for zoos by strapping a coconut to a tree. They then cut out a hole just big enough for a monkey to slip a hand through, and they place a nut inside the hollowed-out coconut. The monkey comes along and slips in its hand and grasps the nut in its fist, but the fist is now too big to slide out the hole and the monkey is trapped. The monkey could easily free himself if he let go of the nut, but he wants it too badly and struggles helplessly until his captors come and take him away.

Now there's nothing wrong with eating nuts, and there's nothing wrong with most sources of happiness and pleasure during the Christmas season. But there comes a point when we can't get our fists out of the coconut, when we're so weighed down by the chores of the season that we can't turn to receive God's gift of joy. Instead, we slip into a rut of material pleasures, and we begin to assume that's all the joy we're going to get. We keep settling for sand castles when God's kingdom of joy is just the other side of the dunes.

So every year God sends that wild man, John the Baptist, into our lives calling us out into the wilderness,

calling us out of our ruts, calling us to let go of the nut in the coconut, calling us to turn back to God. Every year God sends the heavenly host into our lives calling us away from the burdens of shepherding and feeding and tending, at least long enough to come to the manger of joy.

And this year, this year, God has sent me into the pulpit with a box filled with everything you need to find the joy in your Christmas. Don't you wonder what's inside? Nothing!

Isn't that what you most need for Christmas? Nothing. Just think how great a gift this is. Nothing to do. Nothing to return. Nothing to assemble. Nothing to maintain. Nothing to register. Nothing to store away. Seriously, doesn't that sound pretty good? As Patrick McDonnell writes in his children's book, *The Gift of Nothing*, "Nothing is the perfect gift for someone who has everything."<sup>6</sup>

This box of nothing does, however, come with a very short user's manual, for we've kind of lost the knack of using nothing. Here are the three instructions for using nothing to experience joy.

First, using nothing takes a little time, so begin by clearing 10 minutes at the beginning of the day to do nothing. Find a quiet, comfortable place and breathe deeply, quieting your soul. If you find your mind wandering off to to-do lists and anxieties, you can hold those thoughts at bay by just reading the nativity story we read in Luke this morning, the passage that begins with the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. But be sure to do nothing. Don't interpret. Don't analyze. Just close your eyes, and let your mind drift as God leads you away from your chores and to the manger and offers you the gift of joy. As you do nothing, picture yourself letting go of the pressures, the anxieties that weigh you down so you can take the Christ child into your arms.

Second, using nothing requires that you do fewer somethings. So, before you leap into the busyness of the day, pause to sort through the things you think you need to do during the day. As you consider each task, ask yourself where the task is coming from and where the task is going. Is it coming from joy, from visions of communion with God and loved ones? Or is it coming from burden, from anxiety about seeming

up to Christmas snuff? Is it going to foster a space for true oneness with God and loved ones, or is it going stir up pressure that will squeeze the gates of your heart more tightly shut?

Third, remember, don't do anything. Maybe just use the little space of nothing you've opened up to open your heart to God's heart. Maybe just ask God for help in letting go of the tasks driven by fear, or anxiety, or the tyranny of the oughts. Nothing would be better than that.

Now, I know it's not every day that you get a box of nothing for Christmas, but, my friends, nothing is exactly what you need to experience joy. God has already given you all the other ingredients. The message of Christmas is that God has come amongst us giving us oneness with God and with each other. Oneness. Joy.

A box of nothing leaves us with nothing but our God and one another. And it turns out that that's everything. Merry Christmas. **Amen.**

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1 CS Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1955) 217-229. Lewis contrasts joy with pleasure and pain through most of the chapter entitled, "checkmate."

2 David L. Bartlett, "Rejoice in the Lord Always," *The Living Pulpit* (October-December, 1996) 14-15. The sermon focuses on the theme of joy in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

3 Titus Brandsma, quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: how the Catholic Church determines who becomes a saint, who doesn't, and why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990)

4 *Today in the Word* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, June 1988) at p. 18

5 Paul Tillich, "The Meaning of Joy," *The New Being* (Charles Scribner and Sons, 1955)

<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=375&C=32>

6 Patrick McDonnell, *The Gift of Nothing* (New York: King Features Syndicate, 2005) cf. Max Lucado, *You Are Special* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 1997) This is another moving

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children's story on the theme of how God loves us for who we are, not for what we do.