

REJOICE
Zephaniah 3:14-20

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12 December 2021

Joy is complicated. Especially if you are a caring person, an empathetic person, an informed person who knows how much suffering there is in the world. It's hard to feel joy when the person sitting next to you is grieving. It doesn't feel right to seek experiences of joy when so many people are just struggling to survive. Yet the Bible tells us to be joyful.

I've told this story before, but it comes to mind again. Early in my ministry, I was leading a Wednesday evening prayer service during the season of Lent. The date was April 1. I decided that I would focus my meditation that night on the passage from the letters in the New Testament that calls on us to be "fools for Christ." It was April Fool's Day, after all. I planned a rather lighthearted message. The first person to arrive in the small chapel was an older man. While we were waiting for others, he told me that he'd come straight from the hospital. His wife had been in for tests and they'd just found out she'd been diagnosed with cancer. I no longer wanted to give a lighthearted April Fool's Day message.

I'll never forget once in this church - in our old sanctuary - giving a sermon about marriage and a newly-divorced woman walked out. It was too painful for her to hear. There have been times I've seen a family with a delightful infant sit right next to a couple whom I know is struggling with infertility. Joy is sitting right next to pain.

We are called to be joyful, yet it's complicated.

The prophet Zephaniah brings a message to God's people in the context of national disgrace and exile. We don't know exactly when Zephaniah was active - was it during the time the Jewish people were banished from Jerusalem, or was it slightly before or after? Regardless, that entire period was a time of great challenge. The people to whom Zephaniah spoke were worried. Their nation was embarrassed on the international scene - foreign armies

were a constant threat and sometimes a reality. They even experienced a lack of food and water, the basic necessities of life.

Most of the book of Zephaniah is a dire warning, an appeal for people to return to faithfulness. Let me just put it this way - it's not a book that makes you feel joyful. But our passage for today is the last seven verses of the book. Zephaniah believes that the Jewish people will listen to his instruction and will receive the blessings that come from being once again in right relationship with God. "This is what God wants for you," Zephaniah says. "God wants you to experience calm and love, rejoicing and singing, an absence of fear. This experience of abundant grace is not only for you, but for all people everywhere - those who are differently abled, those who feel outcast, those who have felt ashamed. Rejoice. Rejoice in the presence of God."

I received an email from one of our members a couple of weeks ago. Do you know how sometimes you can feel someone's emotions even through email? What I felt from his words was despair. "Kelly, I don't know when we'll feel comfortable being back in church. I'm so discouraged about this pandemic." I wrote him back and I said, "I'll tell you what keeps me feeling strong and encouraged. It is remembering how many of God's people throughout the centuries have faced adversity and persevered...people who not only survived, but who found joy and meaning even though their external circumstances were very difficult."

I have read memoirs of Holocaust survivors who describe how they were able to keep their inner selves vibrant even while witnessing the most inhuman torture. They maintained a belief that they were created by God, that they were still in relationship with God, and that therefore their lives had dignity and purpose. Even in places like Auschwitz. They were able to help those around them, and that ability to provide some loving service to another human being was a source of joy.

The writer Rebecca Solnit researched what happens to people and communities after disasters like Hurricane Katrina. She discovered that many people find a sense of

neighborliness that is nothing short of joyful. It doesn't mean, of course, that they're glad for the disaster, but something happens in a time of emergency that can bring life to a new level; it gets us out of ourselves and connects us with one another in new and profound ways. Here's how she put it in her book: "The joy in disaster comes...from that purposefulness, the immersion in service and survival and from an affection that is not private and personal but civic: the love of strangers for each other, of a citizen for his or her city, of belonging to a greater whole, of doing the work that matters."

When we find joy in life's big or small moments, when we experience gratitude, when we appreciate the gifts of beauty and nature, we are more motivated and inspired to work for justice and engage in acts of compassion. So every year, we light the candle of joy. After 9/11. During a pandemic. Every year. Joy is never out of season.

This is Susan Sparks. And this is how she describes herself on her website: Hi y'all, I'm **Susan Sparks**—a trial lawyer turned preacher, comedian, best-selling author, inspirational speaker, award-winning nationally syndicated columnist, and Harley-riding cowboy boot addict. I know, I know . . . this sounds more like a personality disorder than a career path.

Whatever it is, I love what I do! Why? Because . . .

I help people reclaim their joy.

Stress, unforeseen crises, commitments, aging parents, kids, health issues, and money worries weigh on us constantly. But even in the worst of circumstances, it's still life. And we can still choose joy.

Here's my philosophy in a nutshell:

If you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself. And if you can forgive yourself, you can forgive others.

Laughter reduces the effects of stress, promotes physical healing, alters our perspectives, defuses negativity and conflict, bridges human differences, generates hope, restores our sense of purpose, and renews our ability to see miracles in everyday life.

That's why my mission in life is to **change the world . . . one smile at a time.**

She is now the pastor of a Baptist church in Manhattan. Last year, when we weren't able to worship together in person during the pandemic, Susan wrote and shared with her congregation, "Ten Commandments for Joy." I'd like to close this sermon by sharing them with you:

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF JOY

1-Thou Shalt Not Worry

News flash: Life is not a holy contract in which God promises a calm passage; the only promise is a safe landing. Therefore, instead of asking God why this is happening TO you, thank God for being WITH you.

2-Thou Shalt Not Let Anger Steal Your Joy

The biggest thief of joy is anger. The classic example: Someone did you wrong, and you just won't let it go. Fine. But be clear, to accommodate all that anger, your heart has to make room, which means things like joy get squeezed out. As the old saying goes, the one who has the most influence in your life is the one you refuse to forgive.

3-Thou Shalt Believe You Deserve Joy

Joy and laughter are the most important healing tools we have. Sadly, thanks to low self-esteem, high self-doubt, and negative people in our environment, some of us don't believe we

deserve to be happy. Do you? If not, why not? Is the reason true? If not, why do you carry it around? Who could you be without that excuse?

4-Thou Shalt Laugh with God

We were created in God's image, and we laugh and feel joy. Therefore, laughter and joy must also be aspects of the holy. Bottom line? We are children of a God with a sense of humor. To be whole, we must be willing to share all of ourselves with God—the anger, the pain, the tears, and the laughter. It's all holy.

5-Thou Shalt Pray It and Say It: I'm Grateful!

Start your day with a prayer of gratitude. Acknowledge your blessings. Then, act on that gratitude. Say "thank you" to at least three people during your day—preferably someone you don't know. Share a kind word, a written note of thanks, a smile. Pray it and say it! Gratitude is the quickest route to joy.

6-Thou Shalt Laugh with Your Neighbor

When we laugh with someone, whether family, friend, or telemarketer, our worlds overlap for a split second. We share something. It's then that the differences fade, and the commonalities gleam through. Remember: You can't hate someone with whom you've laughed.

7-Thou Shalt Laugh and Eat Chocolate and Chili Peppers

All three make us feel good. The increased oxygen from laughing, the serotonin in chocolate, and the capsaicin from chilis produce a boost of endorphins, nature's own "happy pill." You can also do an hour on the treadmill to get that same endorphin high, but I'd suggest laughing while nibbling on a chili dark chocolate bar.

8-Thou Shalt Be Like the Little Children

Children are said to laugh approximately 300 times a day and adults less than 20. Somewhere between cartoons and carpools, our laughter gets lost. Spend a few minutes watching a little child squealing with laughter, eyes full of awe at everyday miracles. When was the last time you laughed out loud or were awed by something wonderful? Start today.

9-Thou Shalt Lean on Laughter in Times of Trouble

Laughing in a place of pain is the most courageous and rebellious thing you can do. That pain does not own you. It is only what you are experiencing. By tapping into your ability to laugh, you are reminding yourself, and everyone around you, that “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

10 -Thou Shalt Not Waste ANY Opportunities for Joy

To paraphrase Erma Bombeck, think of all the women on the Titanic, who, on that fateful night, said “no” to dessert. It’s easy to postpone joy in times of crisis or pain, but time keeps ticking. No matter where we find ourselves in life, it’s still life—it’s still a gift. And we must honor that gift in all we do.

May you experience many moments of uncomplicated joy this week - this video may help put you in the mood!

*This sermon borrows heavily from Susan Sparks.