



**December 17, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Zephaniah 3:14-15, 17-19

Luke 3:2-3, 10-14

## “What’s all the singing about?”

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. This is the Sunday that is characterized by the mood of JOY. This is JOY SUNDAY! We symbolize joy today by lighting the rose colored candle on the Advent wreath. We began our time of worship by singing “Good Christian Friends REJOICE”! Many of our Christmas carols speak of joy. Even secular Christmas songs describe “jolly old St. Nicholas”.

This IS a joyous time- this Advent time of expecting Christmas—or is it? Do we ever recognize Scrooge-like rumblings in our hearts and minds? Do any “Bah”s or “Humbug”s percolate below the surface of our smiling faces?

There’s a cartoon in the Chicago Tribune that is currently portraying the tragic holiday breakdown of the main character. The man snapped after being trapped in an elevator for hours, listening to piped in Christmas songs.

Do we sometimes find ourselves wondering “What’s all the singing about, anyway?”

In each Advent season life may bring struggles that make it difficult for us to sincerely experience and express joy.

The mundane tasks of preparation for holiday gift exchanges, meals and family gatherings can consume our joy, leaving us exhausted and frazzled.

Some folks lose their jobs right before Christmas. Some folks develop serious marital problems right before Christmas. Some folks learn that a child is in serious trouble, right before Christmas. Some folks are injured, fall ill, need surgery or debilitating treatments right before Christmas. I am aware of many in our congregation who are dealing with illness, treatments and surgery in this Advent season.

Sometimes people lose a loved one, right before Christmas. And everyone who has lost a loved one, even if it happened several months, or a year or more in the past, may find Christmas painful.

In these kinds of situations we may seriously question, “What’s all the singing about, anyway?”

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons for today answer that question. These words of Scripture tell us what all the singing is about.

Let’s begin with the words from Zephaniah. His people faced enemies, even conquest and exile. They were also on the wrong track in their religious practices, according to the prophet. So his words were offered to a mixed-up group of people, who had faced suffering. They were people like us, in many ways. What were they, and what are we told about God, through the prophet?

First: ***The Lord is in your midst.*** In the midst of whatever life brings, God is present.

The words from Zephaniah promise that God comes to us where we are—and comes with a purpose and a plan. God comes

- to renew you in his love
- to rejoice over you with gladness
- to exult over you with singing
- to deal with disasters and oppression in your life
- to bring you close, and restore your fortunes.

This is a promise made to each of us personally.

God comes to renew you in his love. This doesn’t just mean God speaks words of love to you. It means God is actively doing things out of love for you. What kind of things? God is working to put an end to your oppressions—those things that weigh you down. God is dealing with your burdens- both physical and emotional.

God comes to heal the ways you are lame- to remove whatever prevents you from standing up straight. These can be physical conditions that limit you or attitudes of not being of much value. In whatever way you are an outcast- God is working to banish your fear, to teach you self-love and acceptance.

God is filled with joy about YOU. What is all the singing about? It’s about the personal joy we feel when we begin to believe that God loves us and takes great delight in each one of us—hungering for a personal relationship that begins today and deepens and strengthens into eternity. We are full of joy as we experience the love of an active God who knows our hurts, cares about them, and acts to **DO SOMETHING** about them. That God is the source of our joy; that God- who came to us in the flesh

at Christmas and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. That's what all the singing is about.

But this is not the whole story. Luke's Gospel reminds us that the good news of God's coming is also for others. God comes to break oppression, heal the lame, restore people to homes, restore reputations and relationships- FOR EVERYONE. And God wants us to be a part of what He is doing.

That's what John the Baptist was teaching. We are called BEYOND the joy God brings in our personal situations to being a part of God's saving love by:

- sharing our coats and food (What a joy it is to see our congregation share material blessings and time with others- through the Angel Tree, the Stuff the Turkey outreach, Salvation Army bell ringing- this is TRULY CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS—more so than our holiday dinners.)
- never taking advantage of another
- not taking more than we deserve or require
- turning away from theft, violence
- not pining away for MORE materially, but being content with an adequate living.

(These last four are harder for us at Christmas. We have trouble not taking more than we require at buffet tables. We blind ourselves to the ways our spending on ourselves and our own loved ones might really be THEFT in a way—using God's money mostly for US, not for OTHERS. Secular voices at Christmas URGE us to pine for MORE materially, and to believe only expensive gifts truly express the magnitude of our love to dear ones.)

The Christmas message we sing is a message of joy. It's a message of joy that calls us to STRETCH and GROW.

God comes for ME- with saving love and help no matter what life throws at me.

God comes for YOU- with saving love and help no matter what life throws at you.

God comes for EVERYONE—and asks us, “Will you be a part of my saving love? Will you help me as I offer it to others?” Christmas is about RECEIVING the love and help of God in your everyday, ordinary life. But Christmas is ALSO about GIVING—and not just giving of GIFTS—it's about giving yourself into God's hands, so he might use you to love and care for others.

What's all the singing about at Christmas? It's about JOY- for me, for you, for all. The message of Christmas is a message of joy. The message of Christmas is FOR THE WORLD. Joy to the World, the Lord is come.