

TIME FOR JOY



Christmas is a time for joy. We are told to be joyful. We want to feel joy. We want to share joy with others. But joy can be hard to find sometimes. It isn't accidental. Joy is something to pursue and guard—to cultivate and value. God gives us the season of Christmas to interrupt our patterns and calendars. It is a time for more celebration and gathering with friends, to treasure family and to remember the birth of Jesus Christ—God's greatest gift of His own Son. Let's take time for joy.

TIME FOR JOY • Zephaniah 3:14–20 • Timothy McConnell • December 16, 2018

On whose authority? Who says? Have you ever asked that? I'm sure you have. "You can't go in there." "You can't eat that." "You can't open that yet." Oh yeah? Who says? Or maybe you have been the subject of unfair criticism in your life at some point. You heard that someone was speaking badly of you behind your back, but then someone says, "Yeah, but consider the source." Maybe the person initiating the criticism has more problems than the one being criticized. Maybe. Who says? Consider the source. It's good advice. Today, as we look at Christmas as a **Time for Joy**, I want to ask you to consider the source. I want you to ask, "Oh yeah? Who says?" Because the answer, much to our delight and peace and joy, the answer is: "God says." It's time for joy because God says. It would be one thing for me to get up here and suggest to you that joy is a good idea in my opinion, because it helps you live more fully, it's good for your relationships, it lowers your blood pressure or makes all the lines in your face form in more attractive patterns, because joyful people get paid more, have happier marriages, raise more successful kids...whatever...so, here are ten tips for joyful thinking. That would be one thing. Tim thinks we should know joy. But that isn't what I'm saying. I'm saying it is time for joy, not because I say so, not because you say so, not because the world says so, it is time for joy because God says so. Joy doesn't depend on you or me. Joy is something God is doing. Who says? God says.

What is your default notion of the character and personality of God? Be honest. I'm sure I've asked you this before, and if you are a Christian and you've heard some sermons before, I know you've heard leaders ask about this, and I'll try not to be trite or clichéd, but the truth is these notions of God are trite and clichéd and somehow we fall back into them again and again. Who is God? Is He your father, only bigger and more powerful; your earthly father only even more so? Is He the unforgiving judge, watching carefully to see if you make a mistake? Is He the cosmic killjoy, saying no to everything you think sounds fun and demanding you live a bored and bland life? Who you think God is can really mess with how you live your life, and certainly can mess with how you worship or pray or attempt to have any relationship with God at all. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" (John 14:9–10). If you want to know who God is, look to Jesus.

But God can also be seen clearly in the Old Testament. The notion that there is a "god" of the Old Testament who is angry and bitter and mean, then a different "god"

in the New Testament that is loving and happy and nice—this notion is totally false. The same God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, is revealed to us straight through the inspired Scriptures from front to back. The joy of the Lord is found in the prophets. So we read Zephaniah today. It is customary for Christians to read the prophets during Advent, this season awaiting the birth. Nobody knew about waiting like these prophets, who all looked with hope for a promised Messiah to come. Zephaniah was anointed to share the Word of God. He was a prophet. Prophets began their prophecy with "Thus sayeth the Lord." "Here is what God says." So this book opens with "The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi...etc." (Zephaniah 1:1). This wasn't one guy's best run at things. This isn't Zephaniah's insightful commentary on the state of affairs. This is the Word of the Lord. Who says? God says.

Zephaniah was a prophet back around 620 BC during the reign of King Josiah in Judah. The great nation Israel from King David's time and Solomon's time had been conquered and split and diminished, and it looked like the candle was about to go out when King Josiah initiated a number of renewing, reforming, acts to get the people back in touch with God. This short book of prophecy is a scathing indictment of a people far from God, and the enemy nations attacking them, and a world devoid of justice. It is not a joyful book. The people of God steal and cheat and take advantage of one another. The enemies of the people of God taunt them and attack them with impunity. The religious leaders themselves are unfaithful, fickle, profane, selfish and consuming. It's not a happy book! But it's not a happy time. Still, there are signs that God, who everybody seems to assume either doesn't care, or isn't involved, or will never do anything about it all—God is about to act to set things right in a world that has gone way, way wrong. God appoints a time for joy.

Just quickly, here's a verse from chapter one: "Be silent before the Sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited" (Zephaniah 1:7). What on earth does that mean? Here's evidence in my view that the inspired Scriptures were mysteries even to the men who wrote them, until Christ came. What sacrifice has the Lord prepared? What host makes the guests he invited holy? This parallels a silence injunction in Habakkuk 2:20, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him," and one in Zechariah: "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (Zechariah 2:13 ESV), which three verses, as a Scripture cluster, provide the basis for one of my favorite

Christmas carols: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in His hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand." What's the point? The point is the Spirit was whispering something to these prophets they could hardly themselves understand, but that you and I can now see in the light of the incarnation of Christ. If you are in a moment of confusion and you can't see ahead, hold on. God will appoint a time for joy.

Okay, let's push on. Because not only are there hints that God is going to do something, but we get to a song. When God does what God is going to do, there is going to be a song. "Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!" (Zephaniah 3:14). When God acts, there is gladness, rejoicing, singing, shouting. What makes you celebrate? I mean what makes you shout for joy? Woohoo! Yes! Like the cadets at Air Force Academy graduation chucking their hats in the air as high as they can kind of celebrating. There is something God intends to do, has done in world history and intends to do in your own life, in your own heart, that causes that kind of celebration and more. What is it? It is this: God intends to be with you. Immanuel, God with us. "On that day," says Zephaniah—now this is before Jesus, looking forward—"On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing'" (Zephaniah 3:16–17). On that day, the Lord Your God will be with you. Matthew 1:23: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')." The day that's coming? It's Christmas day. Jesus' birthday. God with us.

What is Jesus going to be like? What is God really like? What does God intend? Keep verse 17 up in front of you. He's a Mighty Warrior. Here is might mightier than might; power more powerful than power. You thought the way of the world was the way it is, Jesus comes with power and might to set things straight again. I don't know what powers are pushing against you causing you to walk slanted through life, but in Jesus there is power to set things right again. He's a Mighty Warrior who saves. He's a Savior. But how does He feel about you? Maybe you've been rescued before by a lifeguard or a first responder of some kind. Maybe they were nice to you, but they could just have easily expressed some frustration. "Why in the world did you drive off into that ditch in the first place? What's the matter with you?" Not Jesus. Look. "He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer

rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." None of this false dichotomy between the wrath of God and the love of God. Look, the love of God burns so intensely it cannot stand your self- and other-harming disobedience. It's all love. It's all love. In Christ, the love of God will not push you away, it will draw you close. And look at this: God "will rejoice over you with singing." Our God sings! Jesus sings! God sings over you with joy. He loves you so much, you have no idea. He delights in you! God sings a song! Our God can sing! He sings a song over you with joy.

Three implications from all of this, and then I'll close. **(1) If there were no joy in God, there would be no joy in us.** This passage is remarkable because it does just what we were asking earlier, it shows us the character of God. And what do we see? We see a God who delights in us, who forgives and redeems us, who saves us and sets things right in the world with power—but who sings! A God who sings! With joy! I learned this verse a long time ago as a praise song in the nineties called "Shouts of Joy." We used to sing it at a camp where I was a counselor. I remember singing, "The Lord your God is in your midst" (clap-clap-clap-clap) "A warrior who saves" (clap-clap-clap-clap) "He will exult over you with joy, He will renew you in His love, He will exult over you with shouts of jo-o-o-o-oy!" We would shout it as loud as we could. It was supposed to be a fun, goofy, active kind of jumping around energizer of a song. And it was. But it hit me differently sometimes. I was amazed to imagine God shouting and singing and exuberating, over me. Me. There is joy in God. He is joyful. And God rejoices to see you come home to Him, no matter where you've been.

Two, our restored relationship with God is not just even, but full. **(2) Our relationship is full of joy.** God sings for the restoration of our relationship. Our sins, our disobedience, caused a breach in our relationship with God. Jesus came to restore. Jesus came to fix the breach. His life, His death on the cross, and His resurrection allow us a way home. That's why the joy I'm talking about is dependent on a restored relationship with God. But we sometimes talk about being "rightly related to God" and we think it means there's nothing wrong, there's nothing between us. Like we are even. I don't have anything against God and God doesn't have anything against me (because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross). We're even. That's not a relationship that makes anyone sing. God sings over His restored relationship with you. It must be more than coming up to even. It's a rich, intimate, loving relationship we have with God. Our relationship is marked with joy. Listen, in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in reunion with the Father, you are invited into the love and joy of God Himself. You are invited in, through Christ, into

the fellowship of God Himself. What are you going to find in there? Not an angry, hostile, judge-y god. No. In that fellowship is joy.

Three, this is church: **(3) At the core of our fellowship is joy in union with Christ.** At the core, at the secret center of this enterprise we call First Pres, in the middle of it all is joy in union with Christ. What the prophets longed to see is what we are living out. We have union with God in Jesus Christ. We have communion, a shared, life-giving connection, with God Himself. Last week the elders all gathered at my house. We ate and sang some carols and told stories, stories of what we had seen God do in 2018, in our lives, in your lives and in the life of this church. There was hardly a dry eye in the place I tell you. At the center is joy. I hope you feel it. I hope you feel it at Christmas. I hope you feel it on special occasions. But truly, I hope you feel it every single time we gather. There is something heating us up from the very core, from the very center of this organization, this body, the church. It is our joy in union with Christ.

What is God's intent? What does God have planned for you, His child? "At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," and now these three critical words, three words to close the prophecy, to close the book of Zephaniah, these three words: "says the Lord" (Zephaniah 3:20). Not "says Pastor Tim." Not "says Zephaniah." Not "says Dr. Phil, or Oprah." Not Wikipedia, or Pinterest, or Huffington post or wherever else you get your advice. Not says you; not says me. Says the Lord. On what do I base my claim that God intends your joy? On these three words: "says the Lord." Friends, this was a long time ago, this script. It was two-thousand six-hundred and so years ago, when this man, sitting in the dim light of a failing nation struggled to peer into the promises of God and listen to the Spirit of God whispering what was to come. And do you know what he saw all those years ago? He saw you, and he saw me, one day celebrating the very presence of God with us. He saw us keeping Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. A time for joy.

STUDY GUIDE
TIME FOR JOY • BECAUSE GOD SAID
Zephaniah 3:14–20

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

1. Throughout scripture, the "Day of the Lord" refers to a time of judgment when humanity will be held accountable for its actions and disregard for God's law. Read Zephaniah 1:14–18. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. What does this passage suggest about God's character?
3. Zephaniah warns of God's worldwide judgment and indicates that humanity's only hope for deliverance must come from the Lord himself (1:18). Read Zephaniah 3:14–20. What does this passage reveal about God's character?
4. Zephaniah 3:14-15 calls for the people to rejoice in light of God's presence in their midst. Describe a time when an awareness of God's presence led to joy in your life.
5. Jesus is called "Immanuel" which means "God with us (Mt 1:17)." Jesus is the fulfillment of Zephaniah's prophecy. He is the "mighty warrior" who delivers us and rejoices over us (3:17). This Advent, what would it look like for you to draw near to Jesus and to find joy in the truth of this promise?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Pray for those in our congregation for whom Christmas is an especially challenging time. Ask that God would fill them with peace and joy in a difficult season.

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Next week, our church will gather in nine worship services Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Consider inviting a friend or neighbor who doesn't have a church home to accompany you to one of these services! Visit www.first-pres.org for times and details.