

More Singing, Less Shouting
Zephaniah 3: 14-20

The third Sunday of Advent is marked by the lighting of the pink candle on our wreath. Though this Sunday is traditionally referred to as “Joyful Sunday” the headlines of the past few weeks will certainly cause us to look long and hard today for joy as we continue to process the traumatic events that took place in Michigan and Wisconsin. Though the weapons were different, the results were the same. Horror beyond belief. As is typical in the midst of tragedy or heartache, people seek someone or something to blame in an effort to soothe their grief and anger and these occasions were no different. The word evil is correctly being used to describe the horrible sequence of events, and amazingly enough even those in the secular world are not bashful in using it.

The idea that these were evil acts is almost universal, although it is unclear whether those people who casually use that term actually understand the implications of its meaning. In the secular world evil is used as a general term to describe something bad that happens, rather than the Biblical understanding that evil is a graphic display of Satan’s influence upon the world in which we live. Yes, we will hear and see the word evil repeated over and over in the news media, but we are not likely to see or hear anyone explaining the actual source of it.

It is easier and often far less troubling to an SUV or a gun than it is to confront the true source of the problem. Yes, we might agree those tragedies were evil in nature, but in what sense? Some argue that the evil lies in the constitutional right individuals have to protect themselves and their families with firearms. Others consider the source of evil to be the internet and violent video games, as both blur the line between fantasy and real life.

Still others place blame with God for allowing evil to exist, refusing to recognize, or failing to understand that evil is a byproduct of human free will. God has given humanity the ability or free will to choose to live our lives in a way that is governed by the moral principles clearly outlined in the Scriptures, as well as the choice to disregard or attempt to redefine them. Both choices will have consequences, good and bad. We must agree that evil and its borders stretch beyond political boundaries and social issues.

We don't have to look far to see evil and its effects. It is plainly visible in an evolving progressive morality where the value and sanctity of human life is decided by politicians or judges. Evil is evident in the failure of our society to provide comprehensive care for those with mental illness, a common denominator in many of these kinds of tragedies. If we are honest, we will admit it is only by the grace of God that we don't contribute to it more often ourselves. Evil is a part of life. The problem is how best to deal with it. Some say the answer is less freedom, but the real answer to the problem is more self-control.

On Christmas Eve we'll join our hearts and lift our voices and sing "Joy to the World" all the while knowing that it will be less than joyful for the victims of those and other tragedies. That will be nothing new, as it was also anything but joyful for the families of countless numbers of children slain by King Herod in his futile attempt to kill the baby Jesus some 2000 years ago. "Joy to the world, peace on earth and goodwill towards men"- why isn't such joy, peace and goodwill evident in places like Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Korea, China, Venezuela, Russia, Mexico, Cuba, Columbus, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Youngstown to name a few? At times we want to throw up our hands into the air and say enough- Jesus pleaaaaase come back- we can't take war, poverty, sickness, greed, corruption and hatred much longer. How can we find joy in the midst of all of that pain and suffering? All in all it's a pretty bleak picture from a human perspective. But did you ever stop and think what it might be like from a heavenly perspective?

Though it is often dangerous for our sinful human minds to try and imagine what God might be thinking or seeing, sometimes we need to live on the edge and do that very thing to put things in perspective. Can you imagine what God thinks about the mess humanity has created for itself? Make no mistake, because of His very nature God must also be grieved and hurt by war, poverty, sickness, greed, corruption, and hatred- perhaps even more so than us. Like parents who want nothing but the best for their children, God desires the same for us. He wants nothing more than people to love each other like He loves us. It must be heartbreaking for the creator of all things to see the opposite on display so very often, especially when it doesn't have to be that way. God has given us what we need to confront evil in this world and overcome it in the next- His name is Jesus.

It must be heartbreaking for God to have so many people say “no thanks” to the greatest gift of grace ever given- the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ. In human terms it would be like saving up every spare dollar you have all year and shopping for the perfect Christmas gift for the one you loved the most and when he or she opens it up on Christmas morning they simply say “I hope you kept the receipt”. Can you imagine such disappointment? It certainly doesn't bring joy.

On this Joyful Sunday I hope you arrived with the belief you would actually experience some joy. I can't promise you will leave here with the kind of joy defined in Webster's dictionary. That joy is an emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires. We might sum it up by saying that kind of joy is the absence of sadness.

If you are looking to experience that kind of joy, I suggest you might want to turn to someone other than God to help you find it. Although there are some who would disagree with me, I am not convinced God wants us to experience that kind of joy. There is no doubt that God is good- He wants only the best for us and if He thought that kind of joy is what we need none of us would ever experience pain, heartbreak or financial setbacks. There must be more to joy than well-being, success, good fortune or the prospect of possessing what one desires.

If we are to experience the kind of joy the Bible speaks of, we may need to understand joy as a verb rather than a noun. In other words it is an action rather than a thing. Joy is not an emotion but an expression. The prophet Zephaniah reveals for us such joy. He is speaking in these verses of the “day of the Lord”- something we recognize as the Second Advent of Christ. Look at all the action words he uses to describe the joy of the Lord in verse 14. Sing, shout, be glad, rejoice.

Just like there are 4 Sundays in Advent and 12 days of Christmas, there are 3 “r's” in joy. Rejoice- that is the first “r” of joy. It means to celebrate, to shout and holler and dance in the end zone because we have won the game. Why are we rejoicing this morning in the midst of tragedy and heartache? Because in spite of all the evil that threatens to steal our joy, God is still on the throne. We know that in the end good will win over evil. Jesus will defeat Satan. He is still in control even when we are careening helplessly out of control.

We rejoice because our God who created us loves us in spite of our sins. We rejoice because our God who created us continues to love us even though we may not love Him. In verse 15 Zephaniah tells the people of Judah that God has taken away their judgments, and as believers of the new covenant we recognize that our judgment has been taken away as well by our faith in the one named Jesus Christ. He (Jesus) will rejoice over you with gladness, He will renew you with his love (we won't know how to respond to such grace) and He will rejoice over you with singing. I wonder if He is a bass or a soprano.

Rejoice, renew and the last r is restore. The theme of restoration is clearly seen in verse 20. "I will bring you back". Not only will the nation of Israel be restored, but God will also restore us to the glory we were designed to share with Him in. "I will give you fame and praise". What a humbling thought. If that isn't enough to make us joyful perhaps nothing will.

As we move ever closer to Christmas and the day of the Lord, it is my hope that the joy of the Lord will be with each one of you. No matter what obstacles Satan and the world may place in front of us, let us keep our eyes intently focused on the goal- more singing and less shouting- and yearning to hear the praise of Jesus someday soon. Amen