

**Joy©****Zephaniah 3:14-20; John 1:1-5, 14****December 16, 2012****Dr. Sharlyn Gates****Advent 3**

Today, we light the pink Advent candle - the candle of joy. Christmas joy!

What do you think of when you think of Christmas Joy? My immediate thoughts, as I began writing this sermon early this week, went to the past:

A ten year old me, opening a gift of ice skates. All of us received a pair of skates and we were excited to get down to the frozen pond and try them out. But in my young girl's imagination and dreams, I envisioned myself looking the part – a circular skirt that twirled with me as I skated in circles around my brothers and sister and as I twirled and skated on one foot, my other leg lifted up behind me, as I gracefully glided along the ice, just like I had watched those on Television.

Almost an hour after my siblings had gone to the pond, my mother came and asked what I was doing and why it was taking so long. When I told her I was trying to find something pretty to wear she warned me that it was very cold out and I might want to wear something really warm just this one time.

Unfortunately, to my great dismay, when I got to the pond and tried to skate, I couldn't even stay up! My ankles kept turning in, plus the pond had frozen with waves so it was very rough. Still, ... I remember that Christmas with great joy.

Of course there are many, wonderful Christmas memories with my sweetheart and my own children; so many memories that bring joy each time I think of them.

But as I continued writing this sermon on Friday, all day long there was breaking news coming in, telling of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, leaving 20 children and 6 adults dead; and an entire community devastated.

And I sat there writing this sermon on joy, crying inside, wondering how a parent can ever find joy again after something so devastating.

Immediately I thought of the Scripture that Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31 when King Herod had all the baby boys 2 years old and under killed, trying to make sure the prophecy about a new king, could not come true ... jealous king that he was.

**“A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children**

**and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”**

And in the midst of all this mixture of joyful memories and dreadful mourning, we have our Christmas trees lit up and we continue to search for the joy ... the good news of the Christmas message.

And even with all the pain and sorrow and one of the darkest, longest days in our collective memories, I still proclaim to you that there is good news and that, yes, there is joy to be found.

I think it is even more important to light the lights of Christmas – the lights that remind us of the greatest Light of all – the one John proclaims is the Life and the Light. I think the dreadful news in this Christmas season makes it all the more urgent that we light the lights and that we hear again those words from Scripture: The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness could not and cannot overcome it.

Our hymns proclaim that we believe that what John claims is true – the Word became flesh and lives among us. With Jesus’ birth, God came to us in human flesh. And his name shall be called *Emmanuel – God with us*.

His coming did not stop violence – he, himself, was violently killed. His coming did not stop pain and tears and suffering – his own disciples went through unbelievable persecution.

Yet, we who are not only waiting to celebrate his birth, but who are Easter people, who celebrate his resurrection, believe that he has conquered death, that he is victorious over evil and that while we do not see the peaceful kingdom he promises as of yet, we believe it is very close.

It does get very dark some days and Friday was one of the darkest we have known in our lifetime, but still, the Light shines. The darkness did not overcome it.

We see signs of it in the people who were there to help and to protect, teachers like Victoria Soto– a young first grade teacher who hid her students in cabinets and closets and told the shooter they were in gym. She was killed but they were all kept safe.

And there were several other teachers who went into protective mode – some losing their lives – for the sake of the little ones they were charged with.

And the lights shine brighter because of all those who came to rescue, those in the community who gathered in churches – so many lights all over the nation who have been praying and sending messages of love and support.

Fred Rogers, from Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was quoted as saying:

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”

To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mothers words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.”

It is a comfort to know that there are more good people in the world around us than there are those who would do harm. It is a joy to hear about the courage and the caring and acts of kindness and the support we have at times like this.

We need each other. We depend on others to help us when we simply can't hold ourselves up. Remember how I told you about the ice skates and how I couldn't stand on them and I sure couldn't skate on them? But my brother could!

The scene ended up looking like this: I was sitting on the sled and David, skated all over the pond, pulling me behind him! It was kind of humiliating, but we had so much fun. It was a joyous Christmas day.

That's certainly not the only time in my life that I depended on my brother to pull me along. Thank God for the help and support of those around us.

Yet, even with being surrounded by all those lights that shine for good, if we did not have the promise of God with us, if we only had ourselves and our own human goodness to count on, we would still be able to have our joy ripped from us totally and completely.

I love the promise we hear from the prophet of old. Zephaniah says - <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 in his love; The Lord promises “I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. <sup>19</sup>I will deal with all your 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,” says the Lord.”

There is something promising for the people of God in these passages of old. We know that God came to us in Jesus. We know that he still comes to us. He is here.

And yet, at the same time, we are also waiting. We wait for the day when Christ returns, when we are finally at peace; when there will be no more weeping; no more sorrow.

As a pastor, I have had the honor of being included into the homes of families who have lost a loved one in Christmas Seasons past. I have stood before them, at the funeral of their beloved and watched the faces of grief and sorrow, the lights of the Christmas tree reflecting in the tears that filled their eyes.

I have sat on the hard, cold floor in a care facility, looking at pictures and grieving with a husband over the loss of his beloved wife. And as we filled the sanctuary for the funeral, the church was decorated, lit up beautifully for Christmas, which was just one week away.

And even here, right now, many of us are missing someone this Christmas – missing a voice, a laughter, the things they did that made Christmas special.

So how can we know joy? How can we dare proclaim that we have joy? How can we possibly do as Paul says: “Rejoice in the Lord always?”

When it comes down to it, we who have lived life for a while, who have experienced tragedy, sorrow, hardships, fear ... we who have grown in a trust and faith that that small baby born so long ago in a cattle stall in Bethlehem ... the one we have the audacity to continue believing was and is God with us, God incarnate, the Word becoming Flesh ... our real joy is comes from this!

We know that no matter what happens, regardless of how someone tries to hurt us, or how afraid we are, or even if we are lost, or hungry, or poor ... we are not alone; we do have a Savior ... he is Christ the Lord!

Perhaps our real joy is that we can trust in what Paul wrote in Romans 8 that nothing ... NOTHING can separate us from the love of God given to us in Christ Jesus – not persecution, not fear, not even the shooting of those most precious to us ... nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Joy! Our joy is deeper than opening a Christmas present on Christmas morning. Ours is the kind of joy that allows us to sing in the commendation at the funeral of a loved one:

That ... even at the grave we sing our song: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

We wait for him again. We welcome him with a welcome that is a longing – a great, deep desire for Christ our Savior to be born again, to be here with us – and yet, my dear family, he is already here!

God came to us in Christ our Savior and on that very night our hopes and our fears were met together in him. He came to give us a radical, impossible hope that all will be well because of Emmanuel ... God is with us.

As the old hymn says "Yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all our years are met in thee tonight.

I've changed our hymn this morning. Please turn to number 44 and pay attention to the words we sing in "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend on us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel."

Let us sing with joy.

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