

16 December 2012
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Rejoice?”

Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 7:18-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Unbelievable. Unthinkable. Unmagineable. Another one. Friday. Another senseless shooting. A whole classroom. How do you make sense out of that? You can't. It is the evilness and vileness of sin. Parents mourning their children is how it erupted in the beginning, all the back in Genesis chapter 4, and so it continues today. Half-size caskets should never have to be. But they are. Twenty of them Friday. Twenty who probably went to school expecting to make Gingerbread houses that day . . . Twenty trees that will have unopened presents under them on December 26th. And this is just the tip of the evil iceberg, floating around, ripping holes in people's hearts and lives . . .

So it perhaps seems kind of odd and awkward that today in the church is *rejoice* Sunday. That's why we lit the oddly-colored candle, the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath, for with the Third Sunday of Advent we have turned a corner. Advent is more than half-way over and our celebration of the birth of our Saviour is quickly coming upon us. And so the penitential emphasis of the season lessens a bit, and the church calls out *rejoice!* Rejoice because our Saviour is almost here - the joy of our Saviour's coming at Christmas; the joy of our Saviour's coming again.

And so maybe the juxtaposition of these two things is not so awkward after all - the violence reminding us what we are waiting for, a Saviour; the evil reminding us that our true joy is still coming, and that we rejoice not because it's *here*, but because it's *coming*, and we *know* it's coming. We have our Lord's sure and true promise. And so just as our rose-colored joy candle lives in the midst of three purple penitential-colored candles, so our joy now lives in the midst of a world of sin and death and devastation of sometimes unthinkable proportions. But even more is the white candle in the midst of it all; the Christ candle. In it with us. In it for us. In it to bring us the joy which is ours now, but for the fullness of which we are still waiting.

So we rejoice because we have a Saviour. A Saviour from sin and death. A Saviour from tragedy and travail.

And this is exactly what our reading for today are about. They speak of this very

thing; this joy in the midst of sin and trouble. For two of our three readings today are connected *with prison*. First, in the Holy Gospel, the popular John the Baptist has been jailed by King Herod and would soon lose his head, and Paul wrote his Epistle to the Philippians while in prison in Rome, awaiting his trial before Caesar. And Paul would eventually follow in the footsteps of John, losing his head to the sword. Yet while writing to the church in Philippi, Paul seems to be oddly bursting with joy - using that word no less than *ten times* in this letter, including twice in the verses we heard today, saying: ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!***

Now, Luke doesn't tell us about John's mindset in prison. Some folks think he is languishing there, wracked with doubt, and that's why he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, ***Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*** But I don't think so. I think like Paul he was full of joy. The same joy he had when Jesus came to be baptized. The same joy he had in pointing to Jesus and proclaiming: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). The same joy he had when he said that *Jesus must increase and he must decrease* (John 3:30). But his disciples needed to learn that. So John sends them to Jesus, to follow Him. It's as if John is telling them: *You don't believe me? Go ask him yourself! Are you the one?*

Now, some think that a rather fanciful interpretation. Because for us, in *our* thinking, prison and joy do not go together. What would John have to rejoice in? What would Paul, for that matter, have to rejoice in? And many ask that of the church today: *what do we have to rejoice in?* Especially those folks in Connecticut, or those who have been battered by our economy, or those for whom daily life holds much pain and trouble but little joy. *Why should we rejoice?*

Well, perhaps another prisoner can help give us an answer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor imprisoned by the Nazis in World War II for being part of the resistance - resistance to a regime that was perpetuating unspeakable and gut-wrenching horrors like the holocaust. Like what we saw on Friday but on a much larger scale. And he, like John and Paul, would eventually lose his life for this. But while in prison he wrote: *Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent: one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other - things that are really of no consequence - the door is shut, and can only be opened **from the outside**.*

You see, what John and Paul and Dietrich had in common was not just their imprisonment, but the sure and certain faith that *One had come from the outside* - from outside this world of sin and death, to open the door of Paradise and eternal life again. To unlock what sin had locked. To give hope even in the most desperate and difficult of times. And that gave them joy, even in difficult times and places, like prison.

And the signs of that unlocking and opening are exactly what Jesus was doing in

His earthly ministry - He was *opening* the eyes of the blind, *opening* the ears of the deaf, *opening* the graves of the dead, *opening* doors to the lame who He made to walk again, and to the lepers who cleansed by Him could go home again, and *opening* the hearts of the poor in spirit by preaching the good news to them. All these “little openings” *pointing* to and foreshadowing *the biggest opening all* - when Jesus would rise from the dead, tearing *open* the grave and opening the door to heaven, once and for all.

Yes, John, Paul, and Dietrich were joyful because they knew that not the key to their cell had come, but the Key to heaven had come. The *Key of David* written about by John the Apostle - himself a prisoner in exile - in the book of Revelation (Rev 3:7); the Key of David we sang about as we lit that joyful, rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath: *O come, Thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heav'nly home; Make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery* (LSB #357 v. 5).

So while yes, they were still in prison, they were at the same time free. A physical prison held their bodies, but they had been set free from the shackles of sin and death and were therefore joyful. Sometimes it takes hardship and pain now to help us focus on that, and remember that, and be joyful in that - the freedom we have in Christ.

Listen to Bonhoeffer from prison again, this time from a letter he wrote to his fiancée, whom he would never get to marry:

I think we're going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious; the emptier our hands, the better we understand what Luther meant by his dying words: "We're beggars; it's true." The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ's home on earth.

That is why we read of the early Christian martyrs and persecuted Christians of all times being joyful when faced with suffering and death. They knew that those who threatened them with death really had no power over them - their Saviour had the power over death and the grave and held the key for them. That is also, I think, why the poorest among us are often the most generous, the saddest often the quickest to offer comfort and hope - because they are truly Advent Christians. Watching and waiting. Knowing that we are not ***dressed in splendid clothing and living in kingly luxury*** yet. What little they have or how much they suffer now matters little. Their Saviour is coming. Their joy is coming.

For the gut-wrenching compassion you feel today, our Lord felt it even more. Seeing His good and perfect creation, and the crowns of His creation, His men and women, suffering so. And the gut-wrenching evil you saw on Friday, our Lord took even more - the sin and evil of not just one man, but the sin and evil of the whole world! All the firepower of sin and hell against Him on the cross. Yes, the devil, sin, and hell wanted to lock Him up, too. The One who came from the outside, the only One who could come from the outside and unlock our prison of sin and death - they wanted to lock Him up, too, and so win the victory for all time. But they failed! Jesus opened death and the grave in His resurrection and turned the tables on satan, locking him up in the chains he *thought* he could throw on our Saviour. So the evil we saw this Friday should remind us of another Friday - *Good Friday* - when the Good who came into our world, the white candle in the midst of us, won.

And so Paul, confident of that, is not only joyful, but says this: ***And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*** Do you get it? He uses a prison word - *guard* - to help us rejoice in Christ! For while the soldiers may be guarding him in prison, it is Christ who is guarding his heart and mind; guarding and keeping him in the midst of this world, in the midst of trouble and strife; guarding and keeping him for eternal life. So while the soldiers *look* strong, it is Christ who is the real guard! And so Paul is joyful, and confident. Even in prison.

And that joyful confidence is what fills the prophecy of Zephaniah we heard today as well. ***Rejoice!*** he says. ***The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst*** (the white candle in the midst of the others); ***you shall never again fear evil.*** Notice that he doesn't say: you shall never again *experience* evil. We certainly will. As we did on Friday. But we need not fear it. ***For the Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*** Now did you hear that? On this Sunday of our joy, we also heard that *the Lord rejoices over you!* And the time is coming when His joy will be full also, when ***He gathers us in*** at the appointed time. When - as we are waiting for - our Lord, our Saviour, comes again.

Until that day, there are sure to be many more Sandy Hooks. Too many. But even as our food here is the bread of tears, our Saviour knows our tears - He cried them at death, too. And now He has given us a different water, into which He also stepped - the water of Baptism, a water of life, that we who are dead in our trespasses and sins be raised to a new life in this washing, in the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And now He has given us a different bread as well, the bread baked on the cross while our Saviour hung there under the condemnation of our sin. And this bread, too, is a bread of life, the food of His true Body and Blood, to

keep us in Him and He in us; to strengthen us in the midst of evil, and give us joy. For He who is in us is greater than He who is in the world (1 John 4:4). And therefore just as He has overcome, so will we, in Him.

Those who have to look at and weep over those twenty, half-sized caskets this week may not feel that joy now. Maybe, sadly, they don't know that joy. Maybe the good that will come out of this tragedy is that they will. That Christmas will be for them much more this year. That as Bonhoeffer wrote, that as *they have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will be all the more glorious*. He is a Father who knows about a child being gunned-down, to give us the hope and joy that come after that. The hope and joy of life when sin and evil are no more.

Those days are coming, the prophets and apostles tell us.

Those days are coming, Advent tells us.

And so we wait and pray . . . and *rejoice*. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer quotes from: *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* © Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.)