



December 24, 2007
Christmas Eve

Zephaniah 3:14-20
God Loves to Sing Carols
M. Craig Barnes

Our text tonight begins with the invitation to “rejoice and exult with all of your heart.” Exult? When was the last time you exulted? It’s not a word we use every day, which is pretty much the point of this sermon.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to exult means “to spring or leap up, leap for joy; be elated or rapturously joyful.” Now you know why we don’t get to use the word “exult” every day. To exult is to discover a joy from the deepest part of your soul that leaps up within you. The reason we are unaccustomed to exulting, even at Christmas Eve, is that we harbor too much fear in our souls. Nothing extinguishes joy like fear.

Tonight some of us are afraid because this Christmas is far from the one you had dreamed. Maybe you are away from the people you love. Maybe the people you love have hurt you deeply. Maybe the people you love have recently died. And all the talk about “Joy to the World” is meaningless in your little part of the world. Maybe, but most of us are not living tragic lives tonight.

Most of us are just afraid that as nice and sentimental as the news of Christmas may be, the reality is that if anything remotely resembling a Christmas miracle is coming to our home, then we’re on our own to pull it off. If you’re responsible for giving someone a Christmas miracle, then you have good reason to be afraid.

Six hundred years before the first Christmas Eve, all the homes of Judea were filled with fear. Neighboring empires were threatening to carve up the country, and carry it away. The chosen people of God were hungry, poor, and weak. Injustice was everywhere. Religion had turned to idolatry, and it was powerless to offer the people hope. It was then that the prophet Zephaniah began to receive holy words from the Lord.

These prophets had a tough job. In desperation the people would turn to them and ask, “Why is all this happening?” Sometimes the prophets would explain about sin having consequences: “If you worship the wrong God, sooner or later it will destroy you.” But the heart of Zephaniah’s charge against the people comes in chapter one, verse 12, when he accuses them of saying, “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.”

Whenever a people believe that, it is amazing how much damage they can do themselves and the world. And some of the worst damage is done by those who are just trying to save themselves. “God will not do good or harm to us. So we are on our own.” Those are words of desperation.

There probably are not many atheists in the congregation tonight. We don’t tend to attract a lot of those folks. You are here because you do believe in God, and you want to celebrate the birth of his Son who is our Savior. But what Zephaniah wants to know is what difference does that make to how we live? The

theologians sometimes speak about a “practical atheism.” The practical atheist believes in God but lives and acts as if God has decided not to get involved. “He will not do good or harm to us.” So the miracles are all up to you.

The effect of this practical atheism is that it flattens out our souls. Assuming we are on our own, we have to live very careful lives and avoid risks. We play by the rules and work hard. We practical atheists see only the thin veneer of the appearances and have little ability, time, or patience for mystery. We just want to fulfill our responsibilities. But that never leads to exulting.

The novelist John Updike has written: “Westerners have lost whole octaves of passion.” We are desperate to avoid the lower octaves of pathos and hurt. So we don’t take the risks to reach too high, and just stay in the safe middle. But that means we also miss the higher octaves of joy that dance above us. The music of life gets pretty thin without the higher and lower octaves. It loses its interest and becomes dull and predictable. That is how fear manifests itself in most of our lives—it makes us dull.

When was the last time you cried yourself to sleep, read the newspaper and spewed out your coffee in anger, stayed up all night reading a novel you just couldn’t put down, closed a restaurant with your spouse because you lost track of time, spent your vacation in a third world country, or exulted as you watched a young boy learn to juggle? These are the marks of those who are fully alive and who live in all of the octaves of life. They are not difficult things to do, but they are consistently avoided by those who are afraid of the higher and lower octaves. Nothing is more dangerous to the soul than living too carefully, which is synonymous with living too fearfully.

We may have settled into this fear, but God has not. And so Zephaniah prophesied that a day will come when it will be said, “Fear not . . . the Lord is in your midst . . . he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing.” Don’t be afraid. God is involved. The Lord is not only going to come to you, Zephaniah claims, but on the day he does, he will be so rapturously joyful that he will exult and break out in song.

For 600 years the people waited for that day to come. The promise of the coming day was learned on the laps of grandparents, and a great hope was nurtured from generation to generation. They would say, “Someday the darkness will be shattered by the glory of God. That day will be so great that God will exult with loud singing.”

Then on what appeared to be just another dark night in Bethlehem—just like all the nights before it, while some shepherds were watching over their sheep—just like they had done for years, suddenly the skies were ripped apart by the glory of God. An angel said, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. [That includes us.] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” The news was so incredible that the heavenly host broke out in that great song they had been rehearsing for 600 years. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those he favors.” Those shepherds were not biblical scholars and were probably unaware that the prophecy of Zephaniah was being fulfilled. But Luke knew it, which is why he wove it into his gospel. More importantly, God knew it, which is why he was so excited he had to exult by breaking out in song.

The reason this news is so exultation worthy is that if God is with us, then we are not on our own to save ourselves by being careful, working hard, or trying to pull miracles down out of the sky. Anything can happen among a people who have the Lord in their midst. There is more than you see. There is also God with us.

Recently I ran across a wonderful poem by John Shea titled "Sharon's Christmas Prayer."

*She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them with slow solemnity,
convinced every word was revelation. She said they were so poor they had only
peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat and they went a long way
from home without getting lost. The lady rode a donkey, the man walked,
and the baby was inside the lady. They had to stay in a stable with an ox
and an ass (hee-hee) but the Three Rich Men found them because a star
lited the roof. Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned. And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars.*

The baby was God.

*And she jumped in the air, whirled round, dove into the sofa, and buried her
head under the cushion which is the only proper response to the Good News of
the Incarnation.*

Children are very good at understanding Christmas. They know that when you look at something so holy or tell the most embarrassingly special part of the story, the only appropriate response is to dive for the sofa cushions. And the embarrassingly special part of the story is that God is so excited just to find you, that he doesn't care if you are a practical atheist. He's not. And he is so delighted to be with you again that he has to break out in singing with exultation.

Do you see? God is singing over you tonight. That's not because you have done a good job on your own, but because in the birth of Jesus Christ, God has found you. You're together again. Now anything can happen. You can even venture down to the lower and up to the higher octaves. You can exult! Amen.