

The Antidote to Humbug

A minister's perspective on this Advent-Christmas season is admittedly a bit different than that of other people. Take all the things you normally do at Christmas – the shopping, the decorating, the cards, the baking, the wrapping – and add to that three extra worship services, two holiday parties at church and a partridge in a pear tree. Someone put a pastor's bingo for Christmas up on Facebook this week, including all kinds of disasters that happen – the key person who backs out at the last minute, the broken copier on Christmas Eve, the rush order of Christmas Eve candles, the kids who use their candles as light sabers. I have checked off a lot of those boxes in my time, and it all adds to the challenge of the season. So we ministers, expected to be professionally cheerful and joy-filled at this time of year, in private tend to turn just a trifle Grinchy. “Merry Christmas!” someone says. “Merry Christmas!” we answer. Then to our nearest and dearest we mutter under our breaths, “Bah, humbug!”

But when we – and I'm not just talking about ministers here, because I hear this from a lot of people – get grim and grouchy at this time of year, I don't think it's just because of the “stress of the holidays”. For me at least it's partly because at this one time of the year I want to be able to actually believe that the world is going to become that place of peace and joy and love I long for – that we all long for – and news headlines and funerals and gray days make that Christmas wish seem like an impossibility.

It's the reality of the world we know. The prophet Zephaniah, from whom we read this morning, knew those realities. The first three chapters of his short book of prophecies are pretty grim, as he predicts God's judgment not just on Jerusalem or Israel but on the whole world for the rampant corruption and faithlessness he sees around him. Paul knew those realities. He wrote the letter to the Philippians from a prison cell.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow knew those painful realities as well. When we sing the song “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” we usually just sing the first

verse, which is strong and positive: "I heard the bells on Christmas day their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men." But if you listen to only the first verse, you miss the point of the poem. Longfellow was writing during the Civil War, and he was distressed and almost hopeless because of the carnage and divisiveness that was going on in this nation. So he went on to write: And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said; "For hate is strong, and mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!" How in the world could one ever imagine that things would get better? Bah, humbug.

But gloomy and fearful as the realities of the world present themselves to be, none of these three men, Longfellow, Paul or Zephaniah, sees that gloom and fear as the final word. Longfellow goes on to write: Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men." Zephaniah's day of the Lord turns from a day of destruction to a song of joy. Paul tells his friends in Philippi to "rejoice in the Lord always". Even in a dark and dreary world, joy has the final word.

That joy isn't just a Pollyanna-ish "everything will turn out all right", a confidence in the fairy-tale ending that "they all lived happily ever after." It's deeper and more complex than that. That's because their joy is based not in the reading of present circumstances or even in confidence in the goodness of fellow human beings. It is based in faith in and knowledge of God, God who is by God's very nature faithful and righteous in the best sense of the word, God who always lifts up the lowly and cares for the oppressed and teaches the lame to run a race, God who in Jesus Christ comes and sits with us even when we are in deepest darkness and through his death and resurrection, transforms that darkness into light and changes the valley of the shadow of death into a new creation. That's where our joy is found.

Even in a world that is in less than perfect harmony, that song of joy continues to be sung. It is like a continuo in a piece of baroque music, or the

bass that underlies a rock song, not always dominant, but constantly there, underlying the music, setting the rhythm, carrying it forward. That shows up in so many of the songs of the Bible, not only in Zephaniah's song today, but in Zechariah's song of joy at the birth of John the Baptist that we talked about last week, and in Mary's song of joy that we will sing next week.

None of those songs are just about me and God or me and Jesus, how am I going to get through this crazy Christmas season, how am I going to get saved and go to heaven. God's song of joy includes us, but it isn't just about us. It's about God's great redeeming work of love for all creation and particularly for the weakest and most vulnerable among us, about God turning human structures upside down to create a different kind of community in the world.

Yet Longfellow was still in the middle of that terrible Civil War when he wrote with confidence that God's righteousness would prevail. The corruption Zephaniah saw around him hadn't changed yet when he proclaimed "The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies." Paul was still in prison when he told the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord always". And around us...well, do I really need to go there? So how can we sing the Lord's song of joy even in the midst of an untransformed world?

First, I think, it's important to recognize that imperfection is okay. In fact, sometimes there's beauty in brokenness and imperfection. That's part of the message of the cross. God works through that brokenness. In the words of Leonard Cohen, "there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." And, my friend Ruth reminds me, that's also how the light gets out. Look for the beauty, find the joy even in the brokenness and imperfection of what you see around you.

Second, tune your ear to hear the song of joy. Listen for that deep bass line of joy that underlies everything else. Sometimes it means you need to listen through the other layers – through the happy, frantic melody on top, through

the discord of the middle line, all the way down to the bottom where you hear the joy. Listen and look for where God's song of joy is being sung – and where it needs to be sung. Where you find it, start singing along, whether it means singing at the top of your lungs to the car radio or pitching in to help as people work together to pack food baskets for hungry neighbors. And where you don't find it, start singing yourself, even if people look at you like you're nuts. Sometimes that might mean actually singing out loud. More often, it will mean looking to see where joy is needed and going there to pitch in, whether it's at Our Community Cup or going down to Chester Eastside to help in the afterschool program. This week I have been particularly moved by pictures of Presbyterian leaders along with leaders from other faith traditions going to our southern border to stand with those who have come seeking asylum. Find where God's joy is needed and go there.

Finally, look up and look out. Do what you can to get the larger perspective. The Bible is one of the places I turn for that, as I seek to know and understand the pattern of what God has done and will do among us. In the testimony and vision of the faithful through the ages, I find hope, focus and joy. Even if we aren't there yet, joy is God's end-game.

That's part of the promise we hear at this time of year, in the words of the prophets, in the songs of Zechariah and Mary. God has acted and will act to cast down the mighty and lift up the lowly, to bring the refugees home. God does that through Jesus of Nazareth, born to ordinary people so long ago, and God does that through us today. That is “glad tidings of great joy” and the perfect antidote to “bah humbug”. Amen.

