

Unexpected Joy!

I suspect most of us have been in a home where there was a new baby. ...unforgettable sights, and sounds—the smell of burped milk on crib sheets, mingling with the smell of baby powder. Bright colors in the nursery; twinkling musical toys, gurgles and coos, baby-talking grandparents.

Or, watch a child a play. They can use anything: an old spoon and a pile of dirt; the box in which a very expensive toy was shipped.

And it doesn't matter where they are. I know it's more and more unusual in the age of television and video games and personal earphones; but some children still can entertain themselves without electronic media: creating games, and sometimes even entire civilizations, while strapped in the back seat of a mini-van.

Where there is a healthy child or baby, there frequently is joy, for children haven't yet been jaded by materialism, or cruel experience or cynical influences. And nowhere is pure, unadulterated joy more clearly expressed than on the face of a child at Christmas: lost for hours in a Christmas catalogue wonderland; nose pressed against the toy store window; eyes wide and mouth agape on Santa's knee. Anyone who says that to give a child a gift at Christmas is to make Christmas commercial just never looked deeply into the innocent eyes of a child anticipating Christmas

Leave the child alone! Soon enough he'll learn the "true meaning" of the season—how to keep his joy in check—like the rest of us. I was visiting a church some time back, enjoying the role of participant in the pew. On the row in front of me was a little boy, oh, maybe two years old. His mother was wrestling with whom I assumed was his baby sister—not yet walking, but plenty active. The little boy was standing in the pew, chewing his fingers and looking around.

When his eye caught mine, I made a fatal mistake: I winked at him, and I had his full attention. He turned around to face me, and stood there, smiling. He wasn't disturbing anyone or anything; he wasn't climbing over (or under) the pew, he wasn't tearing pages out of the hymnal, he wasn't laughing out loud. He was just smiling and drooling. But his mother rather harshly jerked him around by the arm, sat him down roughly, and, in a stage whisper audible for several rows, said, "Quit that! You're in Church!" (Have you noticed, or is it just me? Parents often make more disturbance correcting a child than the child was making to begin with!) As the little fellow rubbed a tear from his eye, his mom actually said—*she actually said*, "That's better."

Has it come to that? Can we not smile at each other in church?

Even the joy of Christmas, it seems, must be curtailed. The lights and the glitter and the tinsel, we're told, are commercial and take away from the "true meaning." I don't know; I think "JOY!" *is* a part of the "true meaning." And I think it's OK if some of the joy spills out into parts of life that aren't "spiritual."

I was on an elevator, and overheard part of a conversation—the annual litany—you know it; you've probably memorized it: "They start putting Christmas decorations up earlier every year! They used to wait until after Thanksgiving; now they start before Halloween! Christmas has become so commercial! They ought to put Christ back in Christmas!"

She actually thought it possible to take Christ out of Christmas!

I wanted to take that pathetic woman aside and assure her that Christ was, indeed in my Christmas, and that he'd be in hers, too, if she wanted him. We can ignore Christ, but that doesn't mean he's not present. We can drown out the sound of his voice with the clatter of shopping malls, and we can lose sight of him in the traffic; but we cannot take Christ out of Christmas, because we didn't put him there!

It's not our job to "put"—or to "keep"—Christ in Christmas. Christ never left Christmas! It's our job to recognize his presence, and in that presence to recognize "Emmanuel: God With Us".

I suggested in a sermon many years ago that the very lights and glitter that spell "commercialism" to some can be to us symbols of "JOY!" They can point us to the presence of Christ. But, one woman said, as she shook my hand after church, "No. God made the straw. Man made the tinsel."

Why is it difficult to be joyful? Is it because we've allowed ourselves to be more present to pain and violence and stress? Is it because the voices of grief and sadness, hunger, fear, human oppression, arrogance and corruption in public office are louder than the voices of hope and peace and Joy and love? Why might that be?

Today's text from Zephaniah has a word for us.

It's late in the 8th century, BCE. Ahaz is king of Israel; but he's Assyria's vassal. Hezekiah followed Ahaz, and instituted sweeping reforms in government and in the religious practices of Israel. But then his son, Manasseh, and his son, Amon led Judah into the lowest depths of political, religious and moral corruption ever seen in the history of God's people.

Finally, Josiah—who was only eight years old—became king. Since he was a minor, Judah was governed by a regent. Josiah was tutored by priests, who instilled in him the love of the Lord. As an adult Josiah would institute an age of great faithfulness and moral integrity. The writer of 2 Kings wrote, "*Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did...*" (2KI 23:25 NIV).

While Josiah was still a minor, the prophet, Zephaniah, came on the scene. He was cousin to the King, and a great, great grandson of Hezekiah, the only other "good" king in Judah, after David and Solomon. He influenced Josiah as King.

Today's text is a song of joy; but it seems almost totally out of place, because the rest of the book has some of the gloomiest passages in Hebrew scripture. The

Lord will invade the darkness of Judah's heart like a person with lamps who ferrets out secret and hidden sins (1:12). The result will be a terrible day of judgment, a "bitter" day "of distress and anguish," "of ruin and devastation," "of darkness and gloom," "of clouds and thick darkness," "of trumpet blast and battle cry" (1:14-16)! Words are spoken while Josiah was still a boy, when Judah was still reeling from the evil influence of previous kings. They are the words of a prophet driven almost to despair by the sorry conditions of Judah's life.

Then, abruptly, the clouds part, and unexpected light breaks through:

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷The 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; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.

And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

²⁰At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD. (ZEPHANIAH 3:16-20 NRSV)

Joy is kindled where least expected: in the recognition of the distance between God's vision and intention for humanity, on the one hand, and the realities of life as it really is, on the other. Escapism? Pollyanna optimism? I don't think so.

I think we have in this text one of the clearest examples of a process of biblical formation spanning several generations. A prophet confronts a situation and announces the will of God for that day and time. The message is clear: judgement is coming. The prophet's work ends there; but, there's no last chapter. No ending.

Sometime after the prophet is gone—in this case, a half-century later, Jerusalem falls to Babylon, and the people are dragged into exile. The prophet's words become reality. But even in exile, God is present. Under divine guidance, the leaders of Israel persuade the people to turn back to God. A remnant survives and returns to Jerusalem, and the covenant is renewed.

Later, the sacred writings were collected, including much of the present text of Zephaniah. And in the process today's text is added: a tag—a closing doxology. The last chapter finally is written. It is the testimony of a people who had survived exile, and who could look back and see the hand of God through it all. It was placed in the text for later generations, a testimony written by those who had read the last chapter, saw that whole process and could rejoice that, even in the worst of circumstances, God can and will redeem.

God made the straw. Man made the tinsel. But we've read the last chapter. We know Jesus didn't stay on the straw. We've read the last chapter! He went home
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to Nazareth. He went to the cross. And now he sits at the right hand of God, from where "He shall reign forever and ever; King of kings, and Lord of lords. Hallelujah!"

And from that place, his glory so overpowers the glitter of our puny celebrations that when we really become aware of his presence, there's no problem with commercialism—there's no problem with lights and tinsel and Santa Clause. If we can maintain the prophetic perspective of those Israelites who looked back on their history and saw the hand of God in it all, all these things take their proper place in the scheme of things which are summed up in the words of this season: "His name shall be called, 'Emmanuel'—God with us," the only appropriate response is gratitude and "JOY!"