

Sermon for 12 December 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Third Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:1-7; Luke 3:7-18]

"Do we know?"

Picture this: It's 1967, and my wife is driving our 1964 Impala up Calvert Street, with our year-old son in his carseat alongside her. As they approach Union Memorial Hospital and begin to cross 33rd Street, she realizes a pick-up truck is going to cross her path against his red light just as they both reach the intersection.

A few minutes later, I get a call from the security officer in the emergency room of the hospital, asking if I'm Dan Gleckler and would I like to speak to my wife?

Everything was fine ... but they had collided, and as she reflected, "It was one of those moments when your whole life passes before you and you realize there's nothing you can do but go through it."

In a nutshell, that's what this four-week season of Advent is like, if we allow its gifts into our lives.

This third Sunday, we focus on "Joy," and the wise ones who have put together our readings and songs, our prayers and chants, could have chosen any of a number of verses and tunes to get us going. Zephaniah was, the scholars think, written before the Jews got carried off to Babylon, so it speaks of doom if they don't shape up and worship Jahweh; but our passage speaks of renewal and was probably added after they'd gotten back home and started rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, hundreds of years later. Doesn't matter: Our passage predicts doom and stresses guilt ... and then promises salvation and renewal.

The Isaiah passage is one of those songs that didn't get included among the 150 in our Psalter, but still was deeply familiar to the Hebrews and used in their worship until it became a referral for prophet and priest and ordinary worshipers, generation after generation. Again, it's unlikely Isaiah wrote it ... but the theme of renewal under some descendant of King David, some "stump of Jesse's root," was added and stayed in the text, generations later.

'Way down the road, in the first years of Christianity, our worship planners chose Paul's letter to his beloved Philippian house church, with his words that "The Lord is at hand!" and here we have it as our Christian quotation All adding to the chorus of joy that we are building when we light the third candle of the Advent wreath and push aside everything not upbeat in our moments together today.

Then John the Baptist comes into full view, full manhood, scaring soldiers and common citizens and even religious leaders, even as they find themselves drawn to his rhetoric and piercing look and stark appearance. When they ask him, "So, what shall we do with this joy, this revelation, that we will be rescued from oppression by great international powers and nearby smaller kingdoms?" Instead of, "Celebrate!" John replies, "Repent! Share your possessions; Don't take what's not yours!"

That's what give me my message this Sunday. As your whole life passes before you, which is your call to allow and imagine in these four weeks, day by day and incident by incident, accident and planned event alike, all mashed together so fast you can only live through it, and if God allows, you can pray and be still over it later in the rush of nights and days we're all so caught up in right now ... and you can treat it like joy.

The strange thing for us religious folks ... or maybe, for everybody ... it that joy is not an independent quality as much as a part of a much larger fabric.

I've said over and over this past couple of years Maybe longer, throughout the whole Trump administration and all the reversals and confrontations that we thought were astounding after we'd finally elected and then re-elected a Black President, and failed to show much except endurance and hope and, in the White House, no scandal ... I've said this is all an incredibly promising dawn.

But don't let me give you the story line. Go deeper. Imagine our church. Think of the ordinariness that actually means we haven't died yet. Think of the times we've prayed for one another and others, and the small gifts emerging from this congregation into projects worldwide. Think of our steady, quiet marching, marching, in Pride Parade after Pride Parade, without any newspaper stories either in the Baltimore Sun or the Baltimore Washington Conference reports, despite our faithful attendance at B-WARM and Reconciling convocations and banquets.

I'm not complaining here. I'm saying joy is mixed in with so much else that isn't joy, that doesn't look particularly happy or beautiful ... that turns on a dime into repentance for what we haven't done, or what we thought looked good but actually demonstrated brutality and missed opportunity; that pained when I thought it was time for some happiness...

How do I say that's Jesus in spades? The thing we remember is ... what is it? Does my son, now 55, remember the crash? Marcia's long gone to live her own life apart from me. Our three sons are grown and middle-aged... What do they carry of their life in its earliest years? What's joy and what's not? I can separate. We all can ... but isn't part of the message that it's all mixed

together; that we never know where the separation begins and the darkness blends with seed-time?

Dear God, thank you for joy. Help us to endure it before it changes its face. Bring us closes to the magnificence of your creativity; fill us with your awesome optimism. When we shake our fists at you, and at one another, and beat our own breasts with regret and disillusionment .. redeem us with your call: "Would you like to speak to your wife? Everyone's all right.;" "Hi. We're OK." Dear God, do we know the difference between joy and the rest of life? Give us eyes to see more of this miracle. Thank you, Jesus." Amen.