



Fruitful Joy

Isaiah 12:1-6; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

Our radio waves overflow with tidings of joy, wishes for a Merry Christmas, happy holidays, and a holly, jolly Christmas—it's the best time of the year. These expressions of gladness, joy, and cheer began broadcasting before Thanksgiving this year. One would think our whole society is preparing to celebrate with unmitigated joy. One or two layers beneath the veneer of jingle bells and pleas for snow are those in our midst living with grief over the loss of a loved one, homes torn apart by divorce, servicemen separated from their families, and parents feeling inadequate to compete in the year-end shopping extravaganza. Do we have much reason for rejoicing? Where shall we find joy to sustain us beyond the exhilaration of a festive atmosphere?

Isaiah's words look forward to the coming day of God's salvation. Isaiah looked forward, for life was chaos for Judah. Israel had faced exile. Judah was struggling against being a pawn in the hands of the world powers struggling for control. Isaiah looks forward to find a reason for hope, purpose, and rejoicing. He looks to a date somewhere off in the future beyond encroaching judgment to rejoice in the larger picture of *Yahweh's* deeds on Judah's behalf. *Yahweh* would rescue Jerusalem after judgment and exile. Joy was something to anticipate. It was the aim of an active hope. Faith demanded looking forward to the day of vindication, when *Yahweh* would turn to redeem the people, rescuing them from the ashes of their rebellion. Yet joy was an appropriate experience amid the waiting.

Restoration was on the way beyond the difficulties of the present. The fulfillment of redemption was around the corner, for *Yahweh* would be faithful. Isaiah was already rejoicing in the promise of the future deliverance. He looks for the day in which *Yahweh* would be recognized as present in the midst of the people. This was reason for joy. This was reason enough for anticipated joy—joy amid the trials and stresses of surrounding chaos and impending doom. Isaiah challenged the people to live the joy of the hope in promised redemption. Do our lives declare sufficient reason for rejoicing? Do we display more reason to rejoice than seasonal festivities?

Our first Christmas among the Traditionalist Gaúchos in Brazil was an eye-opening experience. The traditionalist center enacted a Christmas pageant in traditional dress, incorporating elements of the gaucho lifestyle in its retelling of the Christmas story. Most of the participants had not come to faith in Christ, but they expressed their understanding of the Christmas message. After the pageant came another performance dealing with Santa Claus and the poor. They recognized the inequity in society, looking at thousands of their neighbors more disadvantaged than themselves. They assumed responsibility giving of their meager resources to benefit others. Celebrating the birth of Christ prompted them to extend the joy of God's blessings to others. Does the joy of Christ's coming make a difference in our lives?

Zephaniah echoes Isaiah's words. He also looks ahead to the coming redemption. He also speaks comfort to a people anticipating God's judgment with redemption to follow. Like Isaiah, Zephaniah focuses on the joy inherent in *Yahweh* being present amid the people. They would be exiled in judgment, but in love *Yahweh* would restore them. *Yahweh* would gather the outcast, shamed, and lame to live lives sheltered from fear. Confidence in the king of love who would return to redeem the people would give them reason for rejoicing. There would be peace between heaven and earth—a peace initiated by *Yahweh*—ruler of heaven and earth. They were to proclaim the joy of God's deeds on their behalf. Are we prepared to raise the same cry of rejoicing?

Zephaniah did not find reason for joy in the momentary experience of his people. He found reason for rejoicing in the character of God's love—even when the expression of that love was yet to be fulfilled. The circumstances would not shake his source of joy, for *Yahweh* was above the fray and would carry Judah into exile, but also return them in love. There was enough reason to celebrate, for it was Heaven coming to the people's defense. They need not cry out to seek God's presence and attention. They needed to embrace the One who already knew their plight and would see them through.

A while back I told you the story of Angel, a seven-year-old boy who defended his assurance in God's love against the threat of losing the acceptance of his grandparents. Angel understood this faith and joy of which Zephaniah spoke. He lived in accordance with a source of joy that could not be wiped out by the temporary storms of life. Angel sought opportunity to share the reason for his joy that had nothing to do with physical circumstances. Who needs a dose of God's joy that we can share?

John's audience understood anticipation. They had been awaiting Messiah for generations. They had seen the return from exile fulfilled. Now they awaited the rest of God's deliverance. They were not sitting by idly checking off the days on a calendar. They were expectantly looking for the promise. Like children sneaking around the house looking for hidden Christmas presents, they were anxiously waiting.

John's words came as somewhat of a shock. In no uncertain terms, John told them that they were far from being prepared for Messiah's arrival. They were ready to celebrate and acclaim Messiah, but they were not living the kind of fruitful anticipation expected of them. They asked John how they might prepare appropriately. How could they become ready to rejoice fully with Messiah's coming and usher in the fulfillment of God's promise of old. The answer was simple and demanding. It was nothing new of earth-shattering to the ear. John recast Micah's words regarding the demands of covenant love. Stop crying about justice and live it. Stop begging for mercy and give it. Stop talking humility and adopt it as your life standard.¹

In short, they were to live according to the demands of loving God and one another. Allow the purpose of Messiah's coming to change their lives from the inside out, rather than expecting political solutions to issues of character. They were to live the realities of God's presence, living as though they might become worthy of God's blessing. They needed to deal head-on with their rebellion against God. As individuals, they needed to accept responsibility for their own need of judgment that God might restore them to the blessings of divine presence.

We are easily moved by stories of poverty during this season of exchanging presents out of an abundance we work hard not to claim. We are moved by the child without enough money to purchase a pair of shoes for his dying mother. We are torn by accounts of families losing their resources to tragedy of fire, illness, or downsizing. Christmas, however, is about issues so much greater than packages under a tree. It is about the gift of life and a reason for celebrating joy in spite of economics, grief, broken relationships, and suffering. Are we able to recognize the world's need for this greater reason for joy? How does recognizing God's presence impact our lives with joy? Do we allow God's redemption to color give our lives purpose and real joy? Do we live in a manner worthy of salvation's joy? Christmas without the fruit of this transformation is a Christmas without Christ indeed.

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¹ Micah 6:8.

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