

“Great Joy”
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
December 13, 2009

Every so often I like to read a story in worship – and this one has particularly lovely pictures. Not everyone can see these pictures, unfortunately, but I would like to invite the children in the congregation to come forward and meet me on the steps. At least you will be able to hear *and see*.

We’re reading Kate DiCamillo’s book *Great Joy*. (This copy belongs to Union’s library, and it was given to them in memory of one of our members: Joanna Knox.)

It is just before Christmas when an organ grinder and monkey appear on the street corner outside Frances’s apartment. Frances can see them from her window and, sometimes, when it’s quiet, she can hear their music. In fact, Frances can’t stop thinking about them, especially after she sees the man and his monkey sleeping outside on the cold street at midnight.

When the day of the Christmas pageant arrives, and it’s Frances’s turn to speak, everyone waits silently. But all Frances can think about is the organ grinder’s sad eyes — until, just in time, she finds the perfect words to share.¹

As she stood center-stage, wings resplendent, halo aglow, Frances opened her mouth, but could not speak. All she could think about was how cold it was outside and how sad the organ grinder’s eyes were, even when he smiled. She waited until she saw him. Only when he appeared – there at the door of the Sanctuary – did she smile. Only then did the words finally come: “Behold! I bring you tidings of Great Joy!”²

There is a way in which the promised joy cannot come – cannot be claimed – until everyone is gathered in to share it. That notion – at the center of DiCamillo’s book – is at the heart of our scriptures, too.

Consider the prophecy of Zephaniah. Zephaniah spoke some 640 years before Jesus was born, and he addressed a kingdom in trouble. The people to whom Zephaniah spoke had been disobeying God for years; they had failed to keep their part of the covenant to which God had been faithful. Like John the Baptist would do years later, Zephaniah lamented his people’s idolatry . . . their disregard for God. He wept over corruption that had become commonplace – with people in authority accepting bribes and concocting scams, and with soldiers running amok, threatening civilians. He decried the greed that led some people to live extravagantly, while many others were left out in the cold. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees,” he might have said. That was the gist, anyway. God was going to punish the people unless they changed their ways.

¹ This summary is from DiCamillo’s website.

² Kate DiCamillo, *Great Joy*, Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

But neither lament nor judgment was the final word for Zephaniah. Remarkably, he spoke of promise and joy – how God’s coming would be good news after all. *God will act*, he said, to make prayer and service possible again – even for people who’d been behaving despicably. God would remove disaster from them and restore them to righteousness. God would protect them, rejoice over them, and renew them in love. God would gather the lame and the outcast, changing their shame into praise and renown . . . restoring their fortunes and bringing them *home*.

It’s what Christians associate with the coming of Christ . . . and how the season of Advent is linked to the advent of God’s kingdom. God is coming, we say, *in Christ*, to bring help and salvation and righteousness to all the world. Like a shepherd gathering sheep, he wants to draw everyone into a home that’s safe. Like a mother or father caring for children, he wants to greet all of us with love. But the kingdom he ushers in looks very different from the world we know. In offering the same care to the organ grinder as he does to Frances, Jesus breaks down the barriers between strangers – between those we call the “haves” and the “have-nots.” In God’s kingdom (as Zephaniah describes it, too) there are no “haves” and “have nots,” no “in groups” and “out groups,” no favored nations and unfavored nations,³ no rich and poor. In God’s kingdom, there is no way for one person to sleep comfortably in a warm bed, knowing another person is cold, out on the street. The boundaries between people collapse, which is not entirely comfortable for all of us. You have to wonder how Frances’ mother felt, approaching that organ grinder at her church reception. You have to wonder how they dealt with each other after that night was over. But make no mistake: the seeds of joy began to open and germinate as they met. “Great joy” became possible as God drew them together.

In his commentary on Zephaniah, Robert Bennett quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has spoken of the kind of unity that’s essential to God’s kingdom . . . unity to make even God rejoice with gladness. It is what Africans call *ubuntu, botho*, and you can’t quite render it in English. It refers to the essence of being human, and you know when it is there and when it is absent, Tutu says. *Ubuntu, botho* “speaks about humaneness, gentleness, hospitality, putting yourself out on behalf of others, being vulnerable. It embraces compassion and toughness. It recognizes that my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”⁴ We can only be God’s people together.

There are several places in the Bible where people are told not to fear. Always when the angels appear to humans they preface their announcements by saying, “Do not fear” Mary . . . Zechariah . . . shepherds keeping watch over your flocks by night. Zephaniah says it, too. He says, “On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion.” Preacher Deborah Block says

³ Seth Moland-Kovash’s Homelethical Perspective on Zephaniah 3:14-20 in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009.

⁴ Desmond Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu: Selected by Naomi Tutu* (New York: Newmarket, 1989) 71, as quoted in Robert Bennett, “Zephaniah,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol VII, 704.

[that refrain – Do not fear – is repeated] over and over again because human beings are afraid of many things We fear that God is not in our midst and that the enemies of good and God are winning. We fear that our hands are weak and powerless, atrophied by lack of useful work and helpful use, exercised in holding on but needing both physical and spiritual therapy to reach out. We fear insignificance, doubting that we matter in the course of events and dreading that we will be crushed by them. We fear political defeat and natural disaster. We fear shame and reproach, that our faults and foibles will be discovered and render us less than the person we had fooled ourselves and others into thinking we were. We are afraid that we won't have enough, won't be enough. We even fear that God may keep God's promises, and interrupt [our day-to-day lives] with something new.⁵

These scriptures acknowledge our fear, but speak to us the hopeful word that in the end is joy. Great joy is God's promise to us . . . and God will gather us in to bestow it.

⁵ Deborah A. Block's Pastoral Perspective on Zephaniah 3:14-20 in *Feasting on the Word*.