

Dignity New York
Advent III 2018 Homily
“Gaudete Sunday”, by John Falcone

1st Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-18

2nd Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

Tonight, the Scriptures tell us to rejoice! – mostly. It’s Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing. But the Gospel strikes a slightly different tone: It starts out with good advice for rejoicers: Share the wealth, don’t be a bully, don’t embezzle taxpayer funds. Then it moves on to a somewhat harsher message: Jesus is coming to sort you all out – to gather the good, and to roast the unworthy.

Not exactly what you might hope for six days out from Christmas.

We might be tempted to dismiss these final lines as a throwback, as a harsh, pre-Jesus vision of God.

But I think, that this kind of thinking is a mistake.

If we look at the contexts of these three readings, the words of our scriptures tonight *do* fit together.

They invite us to rejoice, in the face of disaster.

By the grace of God, or by sheer luck, or by the power of capitalism, many of us have been spared from disaster. But others have not received that kind of grace.

The readings tonight challenge us – the lucky and the unlucky together – to look disaster in the face, and still to rejoice. And they offer advice about how to do it.

To rejoice in the face of disaster is exactly what Zephaniah exhort us to do. The Book of Zephaniah is only three chapters long. It was probably written at a low point of corruption and income inequality in the history of ancient Israel. To borrow a line from a modern-day prophet: the chickens must come home to roost. The fury that God pours out on this social injustice is so cataclysmic in the words of Zephaniah, that it undoes the order of creation, moving backwards through the stages of Genesis chapter one; God's fury it unravels the government and goes on to destroy the economy.

Literally, this is what the Lord says to Zephaniah:

I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,

I will sweep away the human beings and the beasts;

the birds from the sky and the fish from the sea—

I will stretch out my hand against Judah

I will punish the officials and the sons of the ruler

I will punish all those who wear fancy clothes.

all the merchants will be wiped out,

all the financiers will be destroyed.

Their blood will be poured out like the dust

and their insides will be poured out like shit.

That is the book of Zephaniah for 2 ½ chapters. Whereupon Zephaniah suddenly changes course:

But then I will purify the lips of the nations,

On that day Jerusalem will not be put to shame

because I will remove from her all the arrogant boasters.

Sing, Daughter Zion! Israel, shout out loud!

Be glad and rejoice O Jerusalem!

You will never again fear any harm.

The same turnaround happens in Paul's Letter to the Philippians – this time from a more personal point of view.

Paul writes Philippians while he is in prison – in chains – he may even be facing his death.

“I want you to know, he says, sisters and brothers, that what has happened to me has helped spread the gospel. I know that Christ will be exalted, whether by my life or by my death. So always rejoice in the Savior! I say it again: you must rejoice!

What kind of turnaround, what kind of joy, are we being offered by Paul and Zephaniah?

Sometimes we need a vacation from work and worry, time to recharge. For some people, the Holiday season is that kind of happiness. But that's not what Zephaniah and Paul mean by "joy."

Sometimes, when faced with disaster, the best we can manage is to mentally check out.

I got a feeling

That you could be feeling

A whole lot better than you feel today

You say you got a problem

Well that's no problem

It's super easy not to feel that way

...

Turn it off, like a light switch

Just go click!

It's a cool little Christ-i-an trick!

We all have our tools of avoidance – entertainment, habits, foods, drugs soft and hard. But that's the opposite of Paul and Zephaniah. God does not invite us to avoid reality. God invites us to face reality, and still, to rejoice.

And of course, there are many things to rejoice in; good and holy things coming to life; rose colored candles in a suffering world.

But no one lives a life without loss and failure. And the generational trends are especially frightening. Rising income inequality. Unprecedented rates of addiction and mental illness, especially among teens and young adults, especially in the developing world. A global economy that eats every *twelve* months, what the planet takes *eighteen* months to restore. Ecosystems for which the Paris Accords and the Katowice protocols are too little – and maybe even too late.ⁱ Our politics, our economy, and our ecosystem are coming undone, and *we* are the ones who are undoing them.

Our Gospel reading about John the Baptist give us some clues how to maintain our joy in these situations. As I see it, John invites us to adopt countercultural practices. He suggests that cultivating countercultural habits might immunize us from despair in the face of disaster.

In a world where some people are cold and hungry, give your money away. Make it a habit, not just a one off.

In an economy where profit is there for the taking, voluntarily limit your profit margin. Make that part of your long term financial plan.

If you're in a job that disciplines other people – if you're a cop, or an administrator, or a teacher, or banker who imposes financial discipline on other people: don't act like bully, don't sell people out, don't make things worse than they already are. Make it a habit to put people first.

If the generational trends are not reassuring, bank on hope, invest in the future.

There is a story from the life of the prophet Jeremiah. On the eve of the fall of Jerusalem, as the armies of Babylon swarm over the countryside, Yahweh tells Jeremiah to buy a field – to have the sale publicly witnessed, to seal the deed like a time capsule, in a jar. Disaster is surely coming, but Jeremiah is told to invest. God says, “Fields will once more be bought for silver, deeds will once more be signed, sealed and witnessed in this land.”

Our Dignity community has followed this suggestion. We have shifted most of our investment portfolio into green and socially responsible instruments. A fraction of our investment remains in the general market – mostly because we have a good relationship with our portfolio manager, and because this is the greenest deal his investment house is willing to offer a small scale player like us.

John invites us to make hope an integral part of our investment strategy.

Make it a habit to invest time in young people; not to lead them, but to take our lead from them, from their vision, from their energy and anticipation.

Make it a habit to invest in Dignity outreach; not to bring people in, but to send our understanding of the Gospel farther out.

These are the kinds of the kinds of habits that can make joy disaster-resistant, the kinds of investments that can immunize us from despair, even if we ourselves will not live to see the return.

The name Gaudete Sunday actually comes from tonight's Philippians reading: Gaudete in Domino semper! It's an exhortation, a word of command, a verb in the imperative mood. Always rejoice in the Savior! I say it again: you must rejoice! God calls us to rejoice in the face of disaster. And God gives us the grace and the tools to live in that joy.

ⁱ Just one example: the National Academy of Sciences has predicted that a two degree rise in global temperatures will sweep away one fifth of the world's corn production. A four degree rise will sweep away half our corn crop, and raise the risk of global crop failures to more than 50%. "Future warming increases probability of globally synchronized maize production shocks." Michelle Tigchelaar, David S. Battisti, Rosamond L. Naylor, and Deepak K. Ray. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. June 26, 2018 115 (26) 6644-6649.