

“Grace Arrives in Joy”

Advent III

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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December 16, 2018

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 16, 2018, dedicated to Sister Luma Khudher, a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Iraq, to all the Iraqi Christians who have survived the violence and persecution they have experienced for 15 years, to Becky West's mother who entered eternal life today, to Sean Ryan Lewis on this day of his death and to my daughter Thalia Lewis who has now lost six family member, all between 24-40 years old in the last eight years and always to the glory of God!

“Grace Arrives in Joy”

(Part III of VI in sermon series, “Grace”)

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

One theme dominates the texts of Zephaniah and Philippians today. It is Joy - Joy over what the Lord has done and will do. It is not a “giddy” joy – but it is joy anchored in the acknowledgment of God’s love and presence in human life. It is a joy that is kindled in circumstances in which joy is least expected. Let’s look closer – grace is arriving in Joy.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Twelve days ago, speaking in Westminster Abbey to over 1,000 people gathered for an ecumenical service, Charles, Prince of Wales and heir to the British throne, told the story of meeting an Iraqi nun who fled Islamic State militants four years ago and has returned three years later to the Ninevah Plain to help re-establish the Christian presence in a land completely decimated by destruction.

Prince Charles described the resilience of Sister Luma Khudher, a [Dominican Sister of St. Catherine of Siena](#), and other Iraqi refugees as a testament to the “extraordinary power of faith.” In 2014, as ISIS extremists advanced on the Christian town of Qaraqosh, Sister Luma “*got behind the wheel of a minibus crammed full of her fellow Christians and drove the long and dangerous road to safety*” Like the 100,000 other Christians who were forced from the [Ninevah Plains](#) by ISIS that year, they left behind the ruins of their homes and churches and the shattered remnants of their communities and fled for their lives.

“Sr. Luma movingly told me of her return to Ninevah with her fellow sisters three years later, and of their despair at the utter destruction they found there. But like so many others, they put their faith in God, and today the tide has turned -- nearly half of those displaced having gone back to rebuild their homes and their communities.”

Prince Charles said the return of Christians to Iraq represented *“the most wonderful testament to the resilience of humanity, and to the extraordinary power of faith to resist even the most brutal efforts to extinguish it.”* He said, Sister Luma bears the best of the Christian faith. *“I was deeply humbled and profoundly moved by the **extraordinary grace and joy** and capacity for forgiveness that I have seen in those who have suffered so much.”*

It is an act of supreme courage to refuse to be defined by the sin against you and live daily into the determination that love will triumph over hate. Sr. Luma and the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena live in this courage. I was so moved by this story, I sought more information. I was inspired by what I found. Sr. Luma told her story over the last several years in various ways and places. In the refugee camps, the sisters ministered to the people in ways which reflected their deep love of those who escaped with them.

For three years, Sr. Luma and the Dominican Sisters were the front line of care for the Christians in diaspora. They met needs that confronted them each day. Sr. Luma, with training in education at Catholic University in Washington and a PHD in theology from Notre Dame admitted she hadn't a clue how to do simple things – like change diapers. As she said with laughter, “I had no idea that diapers came with different numbers/sizes.” But she learned. And through the power of prayer, the presence of grace, and living the joy of the gospel Dominican sisters saved the Christians of Iraq.

Upon their return in 2017, Sr. Luma and the sisters struggled with how to minister to the Muslims who had participated with ISIS in the execution and persecution of Christians. She says, “*We healed them. We educated them. So how could they do this now? There was a lot of anger. And we're still sometimes angry about what happened. We are not saints. We are humans.*

But, when we returned and they once again came to our hospitals and schools, we didn't stop healing them. We just did what Jesus says. We forgive our enemies. We love our enemies. It's hard, but we do it. We can't just pray and then not do what Jesus tells us to do.”

This story is an amazing testimony to the joy of the Gospel.

But, let me be clear. The Joy of the Gospel doesn't always gush from a Spring of Delight. As we have seen with Sr. Luma and experience ourselves, the joy of the gospel comes from a deep place, a place of pain and struggle, a place of loss and hardship.

I am aware of this season being really hard for many people. Congregations hold "Blue Christmas" services and "Longest Night" services on December 21. In December's descending darkness, it is really hard sometimes to see joy and to speak of joy. Some of us have lost our sons and daughters through death or separation. Some of us have lost our parents, spouses or siblings through death or separation. Some of us have lost marriages or significant relationships, lost love, lost friends, lost mentors and loved ones who have been the light of our lives. Some of us have lost those with whom we had unresolved conflicts or griefs not fully reconciled. All of us have lost someone or something.

And in this season, we find it is hard to sing the words, "Joy to the world" even if we know in our heart of hearts that "the Lord is come," and that "our savior reigns." We feel the tug of joy and pain. We can find the consolation of joy for those who have rest now in a heavenly reunion with God, but it is a lot harder to find joy in our struggles which envelop us in this season.

Joy is not something that arrives and appears when we want it or need it. Joy finds its origins in the heart of God and like grace, Joy is a gift freely given. Joy dwells with God and descends from God seizing our spirit, body and soul. When joy grabs us, it holds us tight. Joy won't let us go.

I literally felt this grabbing hold of Joy the other day. As I stood by Rylan, my youngest grandson on the Merry Go Round at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, he grabbed my shirt with one hand and hung on to the post going up and down with the other hand. He was both happy and anxious at the same time. He loved the music and movement of the Merry Go Round. He loved the carousel's motion but he was also fearful as the Unknown was carrying him up and down and round and round.

But, like Joy, the more we went around, the world moving and spinning with us, the more joy grew from discomfort to comfort; from anxiety to laughter; from unknown fright to chuckling and finally to belly laughter. The more times we travelled around, the less he grasped my shirt with a death grip. Instead, confident Joy grabbed his spirit and his death grip held me less and less. Joy can do that. There was peace in the end – a peace that passes understanding.

You see, the Joy of God comes through the poverty of the crib, through the distress of the cross and finds its fullness in the resurrection of the dead. We often don't feel the joy of resurrection when we are wrapped in our pain and distress. But it is always there – moving on the carousel of time. The more we travel on this unknown journey, the more we move, the more we experience the growth of God's Joy and then the joy which has left us with the pain and loss of our experiences. Moving on the carousel of time, no promises can be made for when that happens – when Joy returns as the grip of death loosens, but it happens. Like the Merry-Go-Round, the music stops, the spinning stops, and eventually we come 'round right (as the hymn "Tis a Gift to be simple" puts it).

Zephaniah speaks of a joy which comes out of hopelessness. Joy comes from the grace of God, not the strength or sudden goodness of people. In the end, such grace brings us home. In 3:20 he proclaims in God's voice, *"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."* This is what Advent is all about. It is about light shining in the darkness. It about joy coming 'round right in the graciousness of God.

Paul gets this too. As he brings his letter to the Philippians to an end, Christians who much like Sr. Luma's people have suffered extremely and suffered much, Paul reminds his little

persecuted church one last time (after a ton of Joyful praises through his letter!):

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When we look into the longest night that arrives this Friday, let us not give in to fear and hopelessness and joylessness. Let us look for and seek the candlelight flickering in the darkness. Let us find the glimmer of grace and joy reaching for us and holding on to us. Let us let Joy grab us and hold us tight – even as we hurt.

Let us find courage in the poverty of the crib and the shadow of the cross because we follow a God who leads us from darkness to light; from fear to faith; from hopelessness to hope and from joylessness to joy, from death to resurrection. Amen.

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