

God's Joy
Zephaniah 3:14-20
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Duke Chapel
December 13, 2009

Once there was a young woman named Christine. Christine wanted to become a dancer. And Christine knew exactly the source of her inspiration. She was inspired by having been to a performance by a very famous dancer named Rose. Christine was mesmerized by watching the movements of Rose's feet and hands and the way Rose moved with her partner and the smile on her face that lit up the hall. Christine remembered the way that Rose seemed completely absorbed by the music and the movement. Rose was so completely in the moment with her entire body and mind and spirit. Her eyes showed joy. Her mouth radiated with a smile. Her feet could do anything in the world; they could spin. They could jump. They could twirl. The dance brought Rose to life, and it brought the people watching to life.

It wasn't the fame or the lights or the stage that drew Christine's admiration. What Christine was drawn to was one simple thing: *joy*. What she saw in the dancer was joy. The joy found expression in Rose's body from deep in her heart. Rose danced to the joy she found in the rhythm of the music. Joy was in the way the music's rhythm matched her every movement. It was in the muscles of her body. It was in the way the audience was mesmerized with her, hanging on every turn to see what would come next. There's something about joy that draws us in and makes us want to look closer. To be joyful is to have complete freedom to be where we are, like there is nothing else going on in the whole world. Rose, the dancer, had found such freedom. She was free to be completely absorbed in every detail and in each moment as it came. Christine wanted a life like that.

What is it that completely absorbs *you*? What do *you* get lost in? Is there a place you have found this kind of freedom? Maybe it is playing your favorite sport. Maybe it is tending your garden or growing apple trees. Maybe it is singing Messiah or painting or taking photographs. Whatever it is, I imagine that in these times others see joy in you, like Christine saw in the dancer.

For years, Christine's dream to become a dancer grew. And then one summer, she learned that Rose's tour company was coming to the town where she lived. She would have a chance to see Rose perform again, and this time she resolved to find a way to meet this woman who had inspired her dream. She went to the final performance on the last night of the show. When the performance ended, the rest of the people found their ways to the exits, but Christine found her way to the stage. The auditorium had cleared out by then, and there were a few people around but Christine to her surprise found herself almost alone with Rose. It was a moment she hadn't dared to dream was possible. The words came tumbling out of her mouth, "How did you learn to dance like that? How did you actually become a dancer?" After years of waiting to ask, Christine hung on every word of Rose's answer: "Well, I had quite a few lessons, and I studied under some of the most accomplished teachers in the country and all of that was a big help, in the beginning. I learned all the techniques as any novice would. But do you want to know the truth about my dancing? Do you think you'll believe it?" Christine fumbled around to say, "I want to know – Keep going," thinking she had come this close and wasn't about to miss out on the secret. "The truth is that I started to dance the way I do now after I had been through a very hard time with many days and nights of despair. It was like living in a tunnel that seemed to grow more and more narrow every day. My life was overtaken by addiction, and there was a day when I had to decide if I wanted to live. I had really gotten to the bottom. And that day, I said to myself, 'If I'm going to live, I'm going to dance. I'm going to do something that takes everything I have to give.'" Christine didn't know

what to say, but Rose's words filled up the silence. Rose took a deep breath and added quietly, "And I've said that to myself every day since."

True joy doesn't gestate in solitude; it keeps company with those things in life that are hardest to talk about and in many ways, the experiences that seem furthest away from joy. Joy comes right alongside our pain and our hurt and our disappointment. Often when you hear someone tell about a place of real joy in their life, part of that same story that is about hardship. Or maybe it is about struggle. Or maybe it is about waiting and watching with faith.

The prophet Zephaniah, like many of the Old Testament prophets, speaks to God's people who know they are beloved by God but are not in happy circumstances. They are facing exile, the disruption of families and life and worship. They have in great measure brought it upon themselves, and God beckons them toward repentance. Yet in the midst of all this, Zephaniah makes a promise: God is persistent in working out the salvation of his people. God is determined to draw near and to find a path to restoration. Zephaniah assures God's people they will have something to sing about; their hearts will overflow with thanksgiving and praise. "Sing aloud, daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!" A time for a full celebration is on the way, a time for giving whole-hearted praise. "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies." God will be among you until salvation happens wholly. "The king of Israel, the Lord is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more." Zephaniah brings a treasured word of hope to God's people in captivity, telling them that once again they will sing, that their fear will not drown their songs. The prophet's promise is that after exile and captivity, after hardship and struggle, and even in the midst of our persistent sin, with God, joy is entirely possible. Joy is indeed coming.

Rose, the famous dancer continued, "I decided if I was going to live, I was going to dance. Of course, what most of the world sees is the how much I love dancing. But the real question is this: Would I dance the same way if I hadn't really gotten to the bottom? If I hadn't had such despair? Absolutely not. I know that I dance the way I do because of the tragedy that took hold in my life. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, but I wouldn't be who I am now without it." Christine asked, "So you dance out of joy and also out of pain. Both?" And Rose replied, "Yes, from both. Always. And the amazing thing is that what comes through, in the end, is the joy. That's what I get so absorbed in."

Absorbed in joy. Advent is a time of preparing to be absorbed in joy. And the first one to show us what it looks like to be absorbed in joy is God. When God's joy takes hold of us, Zephaniah says, "He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will be quiet over you; he will exult over you with loud singing." It is *God's joy* that will bring the exiles home and means salvation for all the world. Have you ever thought about how God shows joy? Zephaniah says, God will find joy in *you*. He will sing a song that is unmistakably for you. God himself will rejoice and exult – even to our surprise – over *us*. And that is not all. To show his jubilation, God will do something most extraordinary. After his songs of rejoicing, the prophet says, "God will be quiet over us in his love." The verse that we read as "He will renew you in his love" is literally – and more provocatively – translated as "He will be silent over you in his love." It is God's way of saying: "I am so completely delighted in you, my own creation, that I am moved beyond words. I can be content to gaze upon you in love." That's what happens when God's joy takes hold. That is what God does when he brings us home from our many places of exile and estrangement.

These are the things God will do in his joy: "I will remove disaster from you. I will gather the outcast. I will change your shame into praise. I will bring you home. I will restore you." God's joy propels action – I will *remove*, I will *gather*, I will *change*, I will *bring*, I will *restore*. I will hold you in my arms, no matter how young or old you are. This is a song about what makes God sing and celebrate. About what reduces God to silence in awe and wonder. It is a bodily joy that shows God's desire to be near enough to touch us, near enough for us to hear his song and see his face; not just an ephemeral feeling or a spiritual hope. Such love is beyond our imaginations and our ability to comprehend.

The paradox is that God couldn't be open to such joy in us if he wasn't open to our hurting and disappointing him at the same time. God's joy in creating us doesn't disappear when we turn our backs. God knows the wreck we have made of things, the ways we have failed to trust with faith, our inclination to hurt one another, our foolishness, and our stubbornness. But God risks all of that for one simple reason: Because God finds joy by being "in our midst." It is a phrase used often in the Bible and twice in this passage, "The Lord your God is in your midst," and it is worth pausing over. The prophet Zephaniah says God will come into our midst as a king, and he will come into our midst as one who delivers the captives, as one who saves. He will come as one who takes away the judgments against us and takes away our fear. God will show his joy by coming into our midst in a way that we can touch and hear and see. The joy of God in our midst has a name. His name is Emmanuel, God with us. The joy we will be able to touch and hear and see, the joy coming into our midst in Advent, is Jesus. And in this joy is the dawn of our salvation. When Jesus is born the angels will sing and the stars will dance in the heavens, to show God's joy.

To be people who celebrate in the way God does and who share God's joy with others, we too must be open to disappointment and hurt. Maybe you are experiencing joy amidst pain in your life now. Maybe something you once knew as joy has become a place of disappointment. If this is a season you are experiencing more hardship than joy, then be assured it is the Lord who is yearning to be in *your* midst. *God wants to reveal in you his joy.* Maybe there is someone close to you in whose life you see God's joy revealed? Perhaps this is a time to tell them. Advent is a time when we see watch and wait with faith to see God's joy revealed in human life.

If this was the one and only time she was ever going to talk to Rose, Christine wanted to tell her one thing. "Your dancing brings me to life." Rose smiled slowly as the words sunk in. "Do you know what brought me back from addiction? I hoped there would be people like you who would be brought to life by my dancing. And because you have told me this tonight, I now know – so many years later – that my hope is indeed true." Christine said, "I want to be able to do for others what you have done for me." Rose reflected for a moment and said, "Well, then, let others see your joy in dancing. Let your dancing be your joy. Become the joy that can bring others to life."

God is the dancer who is so completely absorbed in us and our salvation that he dances out of joy and pain at the same time. He dances out of pain, knowing our sin, taking onto himself our faithlessness and rejection and the hardship we have been through. And God dances out of joy, a joy that takes hold of him and of us all at once. And, in the end, God's dancing brings us to life. God *makes joy* out of this dance. And God shows us we are *his joy*.