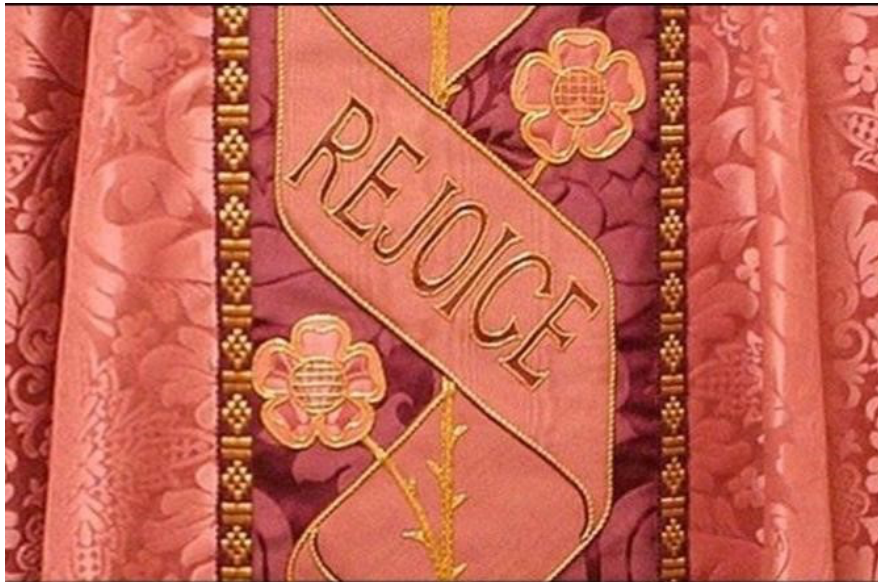


# Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty  
Third Sunday of Advent – December 15, 2024

## Rejoice!

*Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18*



**[Zephaniah 3:14-20]** *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time 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, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.*

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, when we light the one pink candle in the Advent wreath alongside the three purple or, in our case, blue candles. The three purple or blue candles remind us of the liturgical color for Lent, and that's because the four weeks of Advent are a somewhat penitential time.

It's a season of self-reflection and reorientation to who God is and who God created us to be, a time that John the Baptist might describe as "preparing the way of the Lord." We actively *wait* in Advent – not only for the birth of Jesus at Christmas but for the eventual cosmic reordering that will align our precious, broken world with God's realm of peace through justice and mercy.

Advent is intended to be a quiet, somber season -- except for today, "*Gaudete* Sunday," which means "rejoice." Today, Advent shifts its focus. If the last two weeks were centered on the awareness that, "The Lord is coming," today Advent turns its attention to the reality that "The Lord is near." This is good news, the best news, that the one we love and have longed for is almost here. It is news that stirs up rejoicing.

We hear this clear rejoicing in the first reading from the prophet Zephaniah, who writes in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE for Jews living in Judah. It was a brief time of spiritual revival that preceded the destruction of Jerusalem and exile under Babylonian occupation. Zephaniah is encouraging the community to grow some spiritual muscle – strength and resilience that they will need in the coming days of grief and ruin. And surprisingly, that spiritual muscle is not discipline or self-denial, but joy.

"Rejoice and exult with all your heart!" Zephaniah says. "God is in your midst, offering protection, forgiveness, and love with the power to renew your life. God delights in you, no matter who you are and how far you have strayed. Rejoice, for God will gather all the people of the earth and bring you home – home to the knowledge of the divine presence within you and among you."

So today is meant for rejoicing! What's so hard about that?

Well, you might say, such unrestrained gladness is fine for a community that lived 2700 years ago in a simpler time. But today, there is so much division and injustice. And for many people, tremendous uncertainty, anxiety, and

grief. Joy seems a pretty tall order for times like these.

As a person of Irish descent, I get this. It's in my DNA. The poet William Butler Yeats said that "Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy." When I was little, and the family mood was silly or full of raucous amusement, my grandfather would soberly shake his head and say, "Fun's fun, Jennifer, but you can't die laughing."

That may sound a little peculiar, but it's not uncommon to think we should beware of joy because it's fleeting and untrustworthy. Think about how when something goes well, we say, "Don't jinx it" or "don't tempt fate" as if relishing it or even talking about it invites a reversal of fortune. Some of us have been taught that joy is flimsy and ephemeral while grief is solid and long-lasting. Grief, I can count on. Joy, not so much.

But the fact is that even though grief and joy seem like opposites – you can't be both empty and full at the same time – they are actually paradoxical friends,

maybe even siblings. Because the pain of grief or joy lies in the memory of the other and in the knowledge of our own vulnerability and fragility, how easily we can be hurt by the harshness and indifference of life.

Dr. Brene Brown defines "joy" as "an intense feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure, and appreciation." And her research shows that of all the human emotions, the most terrifying one is joy. It's terrifying because when we brush up against it, we feel a "shudder of vulnerability." When we lose tolerance for that vulnerability, we meet joy not with gladness, but with worry or dread.

She calls this "foreboding joy." And that causes us to try to "beat vulnerability to the punch" by immediately focusing on all the things that could go wrong, destroying the tender experience of connection or pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

But the truth is that avoiding joy does not make tragedy less likely nor does it make it easier to bear when it happens. We cannot dress-rehearse suffering. The only certainty about "foreboding

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<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*.

joy” is that it squanders experiences of well-being that can bolster resilience when bad things happen. If we avoid or deny joy, we stunt our emotional and spiritual health, forsaking compassion and courage for worry and fear. And we miss life-changing encounters with the Divine. We know that grief is holy, a liminal place for meeting God. But joy is holy, too, offering a glimpse into the heart of our Creator.

So how do we fully experience joy? Dr. Brown says we must “soften into it.” Put down our defenses and let vulnerability lead. Her research finds that people who consider themselves joyful have one thing in common – gratitude. They have an intentional and active practice of gratitude for the ordinary things that bring connection or pleasure. Like the smile of a loved one. The taste of a favorite food. The heart-swell of beautiful music. When these people get that shudder of vulnerability in the face of joy, they do not push it away and dress-rehearse tragedy. Instead, their instinct for gratitude kicks in and they offer a deep bow of thanks for this moment, however short, of well-being and joy.

Brown’s work on the link between gratitude and joy was published in the last fifteen years, but it’s pretty ancient, spiritual wisdom. Abba Benjamin, a 4<sup>th</sup> century desert ascetic, advised his monks to “be joyful at all times, pray without ceasing, and give thanks for all things. That is the way of salvation.”<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth wrote that joy is the simplest form of gratitude, and Mother Teresa taught that joy is prayer, strength, and love.

So, on this third Sunday of Advent, we embrace the spiritual virtue of rejoicing and the spiritual practice of gratitude. It is how we reorient ourselves to who God is and who God created us to be. It is how we “prepare the way of the Lord.” So as we sang earlier, let us pray the song of the prophet Isaiah:

*Surely it is God who saves me, I will trust  
and not be afraid.*

*God is my strength and power, the source of  
my healing.*

*So draw water with rejoicing from  
salvation’s living stream,*

*And give great thanks for the Holy One in  
our midst.*

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah Casewell, “The Joy of the Saints: Exploring the role of joy in Desert Monasticism.”