

Today God has a message for you that is hard for you to believe. If you did believe it – if you embraced this truth and held it tightly to your chest as if it were a precious treasure, if you treated it as something worth more than jewels and gold, if you refused to let your heart forget it or ignore it in times of trouble and temptation and sorrow – if you did believe it, then your life would be utterly transformed.

But you struggle to believe it. You hear it; you appreciate it; but you don't believe it. You write it down in your sermon notes, but you don't engrave it on your heart. You might not even be sure you know what it means, because no one's ever said anything like this to you before. Or maybe you keep your guard up against believing it too much, because someone *has* told you this before, and they lied. And so it's too risky to let your heart hope that what God says is true, because your heart wants it to be true so badly that you are terrified of wanting *anything* that much, and the only thing that scares you more than how much you want it to be true is the possibility that it isn't true.

Some of you have gone your whole life wanting something like this to come from the mouth of your father or mother, your spouse, your coach, your teacher, your friend, and some of you never did hear it. Some of you *did* hear it, and quickly learned that it didn't mean much, coming from *him*, coming from *her*. And so before you can hear it today from the mouth of God, you need to prepare your heart to listen again so that it doesn't just bounce off your shell.

Listen now as God speaks to you from Zephaniah 3: "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." God rejoices in you. God delights in you. God wants to be with you. God is happy that you are here. God is proud of you. God loves you.

God knows your name. He knows all about you. He knows your faults and your fears and your failures. He knows your thoughts and your attitude about coming here this morning. This is what it means that God is *in your midst*: He is not far away. He is not ignorant. He hasn't been misinformed about who you really are or what you've been up to. He is acquainted with all your ways, He knows your rising up and your lying down, everything you have done and everything you will do, He is near, He is close, He is in your midst. *And He rejoices over you.*

All I want for you this morning is that you would hear, really hear what God thinks of you, and that you would believe Him. Because if you were to rest in the knowledge that God rejoices over you, then your Christian life would be nothing but unspeakable joy. That's what I want you to understand: **the foundation for your joy as a Christian is the fact that God rejoices in you.** You won't always be able to find joy in your circumstances. You won't always be able to find joy in your relationships. You'll almost never be able to find joy in your performance. But because this is true, that God rejoices over you, then you have within you a well of salvation that will never run dry, an inexhaustible supply of joy.

Think about how this changes everything. This is what it means for God to quiet you with His love: You say, "I ruined the big project at work today, and I'll probably be fired." God says, "I have taken away the judgments against you." You say, "My husband left me for another woman." God says, "I have chosen you, and I delight in you." You say, "I am old and useless, and my own children don't like me." God says, "I will change your shame in praise and renown, because I am glad that you are mine." You say, "I've done a lousy job leading my family, and we're unhappy and frustrated all the time." God says, "I'm so delighted in you that I'm going to start singing your praises." Are you starting to see how unbelievable this is?

It is easy to believe that God only sings our praises because He's never actually been in our midst. It's easy to believe that if God ever were to come among us and spend any time in our midst, He would be so disgusted and fed up with us that He would get rid of us and start over. It's hard to believe that God is right here with us and that He enjoys us.

And so I want to take a minute to show you how it's possible that God could actually love us and be proud of us and sing our praises, because understanding it will help you believe it. But before I do, I want to help you want it to be true, because if you want it to be true, then you'll be willing to try to understand it.

Can you imagine waking up every day under the smile of God? To get up and work and live and play to the soundtrack of God rejoicing over you and delighting in who you are and what you're doing? To have a constant sense that God was pleased in you, rather than judging you, criticizing you, or planning to correct you or improve you? Don't you want complete freedom

from what other people think, rooted in an unshakeable conviction that God *exults* over you? Really, that's what joy is: knowing the love of God for you. When joy seeps out of your Christian life, it's because you've forgotten the song God sings here in Zephaniah.

And so if you want that joy, if you want to go through life, your whole life, not just a couple good minutes or days, then let's try to understand what God has done that makes people like you and me into people that God rejoices over.

In the time of Zephaniah, who prophesied under King Josiah, Judah was in one of her many cycles of unbelief and idolatry, which caused God to give His people into the hands of her enemies and bring strong and severe judgments against her, so that she would be brought to repentance. In other words, God put His people into the Refiner's fire that we talked about last week. The people suffered and groaned, and usually misunderstood, thinking that God's refining fire meant that He hated them rather than knowing that it meant that He loved them too much to allow them to destroy themselves.

But Zephaniah looked forward and saw the day coming when the dross would be purged away, and God's people would come forth as gold. And to some extent, this is what happened under King Josiah when He repaired the temple, when Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law, and when the people repented of their sins and got rid of their idols. And this repentance, prompted by the Word of God, laid the path for God to return to His people and rejoice over them. Before God rejoices over you, He must first take away the judgments against you and clear away your enemies, and He does this by leading you to turn away from your sins and by setting you free from the idols that have enslaved you.

That was what it meant for God to be in their midst: true worship was restored, God's law was obeyed, and false gods were rejected. Once again, God lived in peace among His people, and rejoiced to be their God. And His rejoicing was over a people who had been renewed by His grace, restored once again into His image-bearers, gathered together and praised among all the peoples of the earth. When God rejoices in our midst, the neighbors notice! When Christians live holy lives, with clean consciences, knowing that God loves them and that they have nothing in all the world to fear, the world can see that God's blessing rests on His people.

But if you know the history of God's people, you know that this didn't last. Josiah's reformation was a foreshadowing of an even greater renewal, when God would not only enter our midst through His Word, but by becoming one of us. And as we saw last week, before God came, He sent John the Baptizer to prepare the Lord's way.

And in our gospel reading today, John has a stern rebuke against those who repentance was merely play-acting. Everyone wants God to rejoice over them, but not everyone wants to repent! And so some of the religious leaders wanted in on the benefits of repentance without actually changing their lives. They thought it was enough that they had been born in a believing home, or that they had made a decision to follow God some time in the past. But God doesn't rejoice in yesterday, John says. God rejoices in you, when you follow Him with all your heart.

But if you are hiding sin in your heart, and using outward religiosity to cover it up, then God doesn't rejoice over you. He warns you of the axe that will chop you down and the fire that will burn you up.

So what do we do? The people ask John. And he has some simple instructions for them: share, and be fair. Give to the needy, and don't cheat others. John is not telling them how to earn salvation; He's telling them how repentant people live. And they know this, because they are looking for more than just instructions to obey: they are looking for a Christ who will save them.

And for this, John points them away from law-keeping, away from baptism and acts in keeping with repentance, away from himself, to the one who was to come, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John has warnings and instructions for the people, but he also has good news: someone greater is coming.

And the source of our Advent joy is that this someone greater is Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, who became a man so that He could be in our midst, and so that through His life, death, and resurrection, He could once and for all take away the judgments against us and clear away all our enemies. He came to gather all who longed for right worship, all the oppressed, the lame, and the outcast. He came to change your shame into praise and renown in all the earth. He came to be with you, and He came to rejoice over you with loud singing and to quiet you with His love.

This is the foundation that Phil. 4 rests on, when Paul tells the Church to “rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice.” Don’t be anxious; pray to God, knowing that He’s in your midst. He’ll hear you! And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” That’s a picture of the Christian life *when you know that God is in your midst and that He rejoices over you*. A quiet mind, free from anxiety, quick to pray, a heart at peace. Does that describe your life? Or are you unquiet? Worried? Anxious? Fearful? All of these things will rob you of the joy that God has given you in Christ Jesus.

Because of Advent, because God sent Jesus, you can know that God is in your midst, and that He rejoices over you. This is why our celebration is marked by joy, and this is why the anticipation and celebration of the birth of Jesus utterly transforms the world. If they are honest, your neighbors who don’t have Christ don’t have the Christmas Spirit. They might have decorated houses and expensive gifts, maybe even more lights and presents than you have; but the reason why God’s people are the envy of the nations at Christmas is not because we do more or have more.

It’s because as Christians, you have the joy of knowing that your God is in your midst, and that He rejoices over you. That’s why we’re joyful and triumphant. That’s why we sing loud songs and exult with all our hearts. Jesus has come to be with us, to take away the judgments against us, and to rejoice over us. Christmas is what it looks like when God’s people start to believe that we are loved by God.

So Christian, believe this good news today, and let it kindle a fire of joy in your heart that never goes out: your God is in your midst, and He rejoices over you.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*