

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 judgements
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.*

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

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

The Word of the Lord...

In seminary you take classes that teach you how to dig deeper into the Biblical texts. It is called exegesis, where you go back to the Greek (or the Hebrew) and conjugate verbs and search for context and patterns. The goal is to take these finds and with prayer and the Holy Spirit be the conduit of God's message to the people in the pew. Sometimes academic types can lean far too heavily on their exegesis and bog the sermon down with too much research on the Arameans or the Roman judicial structure or what the terrain was in a certain region. In thankfully a different seminary I have heard of a preaching professor who when their students were embarking on their third paragraph of Greek grammar would ring a bell and say, "Pardon me, but your exegetical underwear is showing."

And so in a rare move – and admittedly with a little trepidation – I would like to talk to you about Greek today.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice!

The word we translate as 'Rejoice!' (χαρά) is both active and imperative, and more literally means to make joy or take delight. Paul writes that we are to be actively making joy, actively taking delight. In a world and a culture that is fraught with things that are depressing, we need to be making joy. Sometimes the word "rejoice" can have the connotation of finding the silver lining in things, or being happy with our circumstances, or being content - which is fine. But χαρά because of its active, indicative, imperative tense, is also meant to show that we are to make joy in the midst of the sorrow of this world. In the face of injustice, we are to make joy; which is not just smile and make peace with injustice, but is to bring about the joy of justice.

Make joy.

Paul also expresses how often we are to make joy: παντοτε. This is a compound word, τοτε means at times, and παν means all. We know this, because panacea means cure all, Pangaea means all land, and pancake means all cake¹.

Make joy, take delight, at all times. Not just when it feels good. Not just when your schedule permits. At all times. Again, this is not find joy, be happy type stuff. This is make joy. The Greek word for joy is χαρά. The Greek word for grace is χάρις. They are virtually identical. I don't think that should be lost on us. Making joy is participating in grace.

Why? Well verse 5 gives us a shot at an answer. The Lord is near. εγγος. Now, εγγος - 'near' - has several different meanings in the Greek. It relates:

- to place, (the McDonald's near my house is always more crowded than the one near the Giant.)
- to numbers ("Do we have enough to play Bunco?" "Nearly, Stephen just pulled up.")
- to time, ("Is it time for the Greek lesson to be over yet?" "Nearly.")

In Advent, one of the things we celebrate is an understanding that the Lord is near in time. While we believe the Lord is here and present now, we also believe the Lord is near and is coming again. We live in the time where we have the Holy Spirit, we know the presence of the Lord, and we simultaneously believe that God is coming into full presence into the world again.

But one more thing that we celebrate in the Christmas story, in the time of Advent, is that the Lord is near in place. The birth narratives show us that when God becomes incarnate, it is not only a localized event. God's presence will not be held by walls, by mangers, by inns, by political centers, or whatever. Jesus is born, and there is a star. There are angels in the sky and shepherds on hills. There are wise men coming in from the east. The presence of God incarnate cannot, and will not, be only a local event. This is reinforced on the hill of Golgatha where 'King of the Jews' is written in many language and when the curtain is torn from the top. God cannot, and will not, be made to dwell in only one place.

When God becomes incarnate, God is proving a distinct lack of willingness to belong to only one people, only one nation, only one system, only one anything. Christmas proves God can, and will, go anywhere.

God is not only here, God is also near.

So what if, in today's terms, God is not only here with us at Mechanicsburg Presbyterian, but is also next door at St. Joe's?

Of course we all know where he parked...

Or what if God is with Wesley United Methodist just a couple of churches down from us as they welcome a new pastor in their midst.

God is not only here, God is near.

But how big is God? On Thanksgiving Eve I gave the message during an interfaith service held at Temple Beth Shalom. Rabbi Jordi welcomed me, we discussed the friends we have in common and he took time to explain to all of us present the customs and traditions of their worship.

They were gracious and kind. They meet every Friday night to worship together much as we do on Sunday mornings. They worship as did our religious ancestors before the time of Jesus. Was God there?

My friend, seminary classmate and colleague, Matt Fry, is involved in an interfaith group down in Atlanta founded by Muslims called the Istanbul Cultural Center, who have made it their goal to engage in interfaith dialogue, for the purpose of living better together as a society and a culture. They stress our unity as human beings, our shared commitment across religious lines to make the world a better and more spiritual place, and the understanding that dialogue and open relationships help make living in our shared space - the earth - better. They have meetings one Thursday a month, and then the hope is that the participants go back to their sacred places and celebrate worship, the founders worshipping at their Mosque.

Is God there?

Matt's wife, Melissa, is the director of their church's nursery school program. Many of the students that attend the preschool come from India, or from that region of the world. Most of them are Hindu. Throughout the years, several of the best and kindest teachers have been their mothers. Most of them vegetarian due to their religion, and when there are times when people bring dishes to share, you get some really, really good food.

When they gather, is God there?

What is our understanding of where God is? Looking at the incarnation, instead of it only meaning that God comes to exist in a very specific time and place, it also means that God can exist anywhere, at anytime. Or possibly that God exists in all places, at all times.

And here's where my Advent sermon little push becomes a big, fat shove.
Because as uncomfortable as we may be with the thought of God with people from other religions, here's something that is even more uncomfortable than that:

What if God is with people who come from our tradition, people in other Christian churches, who believe and act very differently than we do?

What if God is with Fred Phelps, a Baptist pastor from Kansas who travels to communities and holds up signs that read "God hates (there are children present, I can't complete the sentence, but those two words alone coming from someone who proclaims the label Christian as we do should boil your blood.)

This is the man who has led protests outside of the memorial services of fallen American soldiers. What if God is with that guy?

Or can God be with Steven L. Anderson, a pastor in Arizona, who says, among other things, that if a woman works outside the house that she brings her family to ruin? He also found some fame recently for telling his congregation that he prays that Barak Obama will die and go to hell.

Is God big enough to be with people whose doctrine we actually work against?
What if God is not just here, confined by us and the people we like or at least tolerate. What if God is near, and will not be contained by us? What if God breaks through our understandings and boundaries and is actually hanging out with those people.

Now, I'm not saying that I believe for one second that God is working for the purposes that Fred Phelps is, or that the Holy Spirit is actively collaborating with and leading Steven L. Anderson to preach what he does. I obviously disagree with their understandings. Perhaps what separates me from them is that I am willing to say that I alone can't be sure that I am right, that those things are left only to God.

I am not in control of this world and the other people in it... thanks to the awful grace of God. Quite frankly if I keep myself so focused on all of the things they are doing wrong the log in my own eye just gets bigger and bigger. Those logs are like weeds that feed off of judgment and hate, eventually taking over your body and mind and soul.

It is so easy to fall into the trap, the taste of self-righteous anger on our lips is sweet and there is energy to be found in the adrenaline rush provided by blood boiling.
All the more reason to remind ourselves that joy and peace and love are a choice.
And they are not always our go-to move.

Χαρά πάντοτε.
Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice!

Χαρα παητοτε!
It's not a gentle request, it is a directive.

Χαρα παητοτε!
Make joy. Take delight. Choose grace. At *all* times.

Χαρα παητοτε!
Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice!
Rejoice in what we know and who we are because we are beloved children of God.

Χαρα παητοτε!
For God is not just here. God is near.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds...

For God's sake... grab the joy.

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

¹ That corny joke is provided to you courtesy of the Reverend Dr. Matthew M. Fry. Matt was a seminary classmate of mine and is also involved in the lectionary study group, The Well. This sermon is greatly influenced by his paper: *God is Near: Advent 3, December 13, 2009: Philippians 4:4-7.*