

MORE THAN WORDS: THE BASICS (SAMPLE)

Advent 2024, Year B/C

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PREACHERS' NOTES

JOY: DECEMBER 15, 2024

Linnéa Clark

Revised Common Lectionary texts

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

The first year I lived in a parsonage, there was a lot of work to do in the backyard. Invasive ivy was everywhere. Some sort of vine was bent on choking the azaleas. A small, half-dead rosebush grew in the shade and struggled to produce a single blossom. I tore out armload after armload of ivy to keep the house's stone walls from crumbling; I ripped up the strangling vines. With freshly sharpened clippers, I went to work on the dead wood, which was most of it. I even pruned the living trees around the spindly rose in an effort to give it more sunlight.

Those evenings spent pruning the backyard were unexpectedly joyful and satisfying. I imagined what the yard could become as I hauled out vines and gathered piles of dead branches. It wouldn't transform overnight, but I was working in the right direction. Sometimes, I could already see it. Over the next few years, the rosebush appreciated the extra sunlight. By the time I moved a few years later, it was producing blossoms throughout a long growing season.

Joyfully dragging brush out of an overgrown backyard requires imagining a possible future while you put in the work, sweating away so that a rosebush on its last legs has a second chance. Joy is a time traveler: it catches God's future vision for justice, peace, and restoration and superimposes it on the present landscape. Joy celebrates the future as if it's already happening while getting to work to make it a reality.

On the other hand, joy in church can feel like an obligation, not a gift. It can acquire overtones of mandatory happiness, as if you need to have the willpower to muster it up. Ironically, this sort of joy is particularly joyless. The joy to which God calls us in the Bible is richer, deeper, and more enduring. It can coexist alongside other experiences, even sorrow and pain. Joy ebbs and flows, sometimes flooding our lives with intensity, sometimes much harder to find. We carry joy for each other when rejoicing is hard. Most importantly for the Advent season, joy comes hand-in-hand with God's liberation as God sets God's people free.

Historically, this Sunday of Advent has been known as Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete*, Latin for *rejoice*, was the first word of the introit appointed for this day, which quoted today's reading from Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). In the Revised Common Lectionary, Philippians 4 and Gaudete Sunday only occur in Year C, so today is a special day. Rejoicing lightens the apocalyptic and penitential tones of Advent. Today, we help each other rejoice by anticipating God's flourishing future in the present, even when our current situation is a big pile of brush in an overgrown backyard.

Today's first reading from Zephaniah is the song of joy that concludes this relatively brief prophetic book. God's judgment, which defines the preceding chapters, has already taken place, and now, God's people rejoice. God appears like a mighty protector or a warrior standing in the midst of the people, but God does not only focus on military strength: God will also "save the lame and gather the outcast" (Zephaniah 3:19), the people who are the most vulnerable in any conflict. Some contextual adaptation may be helpful. To help worshipers rejoice in a mighty God who is beyond domination and violence, consider other ways to interpret God in the midst of the people: a mother bear guarding her cubs, for example, or Jesus' own image of the fierce hen sheltering her chicks. The psalmody responding to the Zephaniah reading features Isaiah singing another song of joy.

Both Zephaniah and Isaiah are prophets, which is to say that they are professional translators of God's vision of joy, interpreting it in the words and images their people will understand. They are well acquainted with the tidal cycle of joy in all its ebbs and flows. Isaiah writes of joy overflowing after a long drought: "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). The letter to the Philippians joins in the celebration, exhorting readers to "rejoice in the Lord *always*" (Philippians 4:4). Though joy itself may be tidal, God's people can practice it continuously. God's people may be waiting for the fullness of God's justice and peace, but they catch the inspiration of God's longed-for future, and they celebrate now.

Then, of course, John the Baptist knocks the joyous wind out of everyone's sails with his infamous line, "You brood of vipers!" (Luke 3:7) John's sharp-edged, urgent words don't seem particularly joyful at first. While the prophetic joy of Zephaniah and Isaiah rejoices in God's consolation, John's joy is more of the pruning variety, with the ax lying at the root of the trees. This joy will clear out the backyard, and more. Luke's narrative comment on John's words is important – "So, with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news to the people" (3:18) – suggesting that John's strong words are actually good, even joyful, to the gathered crowds. An ax pruning unfruitful trees sounds threatening, but it is wonderful news for an orchard's future flourishing.

As John baptizes for repentance, he calls for external transformation as well as a change of heart. When the crowds ask him what form their repentance should take, John gives them discrete, achievable tasks, like prescriptions for pruning their own lives: share a coat if you have an extra; share food if you have an excess; don't boost your soldier's wages by threatening people; don't overtax people for your own benefit. Though these actions are simple, they are not about the spiritual betterment of the people performing them. They will strike at the heart of society's functioning, in which the rich get richer, the poor stay poor, and the powerful benefit at the expense of the weak. This is the good and joyful news of John's preaching: repenting is rejoicing. Like joy, repentance imagines God's future in the present and offers a tool to achieve real justice for all God's people. God's future shimmers in the present, and the people do not wait to celebrate.

Joy is an instrument of encouragement and transformation. Joy helps us grasp God's wondrous, amazing future and begin the groundwork we need right now to include all God's people in that future vision. From the consolation of the prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah to the rough-edged urgency of John, God challenges us to imagine the hoped-for future in the present and to let it lift us. Daring to embrace God's promise gives us the strength to begin pruning, clearing the brush and letting in the daylight so that the roses of God's mercy and love can bloom.

Questions for consideration

- What obstacles need to be pruned in your local context in order for all God's people to flourish? What is the imagined future outcome that guides the pruning?
- Was there a time in your life when you rejoiced ahead of schedule, even though you knew a lot of hard work was still to come?
- What forms does rejoicing take in times of hardship, sorrow, and suffering, like those faced by the prophet Zephaniah and his people?

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE STARTERS

Victoria Larson and Emily Trubey-Weller

INTRODUCTION

Each Sunday, *More Than Words* explores a different Advent theme. We hope to help faith communities understand each one—care, faith, justice, hope, peace, joy, and love—as a gift given by God and as an invitation to action. Each word is more than a word; it's a tool to help build God's kingdom right where we are.

When it comes to your children's messages throughout this Advent season, here's our recommendation: take the tool analogy literally. Place a big metal toolbox or something similar in your worship space where children can see it and approach it. Throughout the season, use it as a visual anchor for your children's messages by stocking it with tools as you speak to the kids about each of the theme words. Borrow tools from a handy member of the congregation or enlist your maintenance person.

NOVEMBER 17, 2024

The Tape Measure of Faith

Word for the week

This week's word is faith. What does it mean to have faith or to be faithful? Focus on the dimension of faith that has to do with reliability. Consider how God is faithful to us: God always listens to us when we pray. God provides for our daily needs. God forgives us when we mess up. God is always faithful! We respond by practicing our faith through prayer and worship.

Scripture focus

In the Hebrew Bible reading from 1 Samuel 1:4-20, Hannah's persistent prayer provides a great example of what it looks like to be faithful. Even though she had to wait for a long time to receive what she was praying for, she kept asking God for what she wanted, even when other people thought she was being foolish. For the gospel reading, emphasize how Jesus' disciples asked him to help them understand what God was doing. Turning to Jesus when we feel confused or lost is an example of how we practice faith.

Visual aid

Add a tape measure to your toolbox this week.

How God uses the tool

God is faithful to us, even when our own faith isn't perfect. God always listens to us. God always shows up for us, especially when we gather to worship, and especially in communion. God always forgives us and always loves us. God's faithfulness means that God is reliable, and we can always trust God!

How we use the tool

God gives us the gift of faith, and we respond by practicing with it! We practice faithfulness just like we practice soccer or ballet or math or spelling. We practice faithfulness by making a habit of praying at meals or before bed; or going to church to worship. How does practice help us become better at being faithful? Prayer helps us practice relying on God for what we need; worship helps us remember that God is the most important thing in our lives. In what other ways do we practice our faith?

WORDS FOR WORSHIP

By Justin Kosec

WORDS FOR WORSHIP

Prayer of Confession

Today, as we confess our sins,
we recognize how easily we overlook
the gifts God gives.
And we accept the sad truth
that our limitations
often create the conditions for sin.

Let us pray.

**God, we want a faith that feels
like more than words,
but we lack your power
to embody goodness.
We hear your call to serve others
yet feel too worn out to make the food.**

We hunger to taste justice
but fear the burning spice of the meal.
We want our place at your table
but resist sitting beside a stranger.
We have lost our appetites
for mere thoughts and prayers,
but we fail to match
our intentions to our actions.
Forgive us and restore us
with the healing wholeness of your presence.

Assurance of Forgiveness

My friends,
God knows you are imperfect.
But God did not invite you here today
for what you have done
or how you have behaved.
God loves you.
God always cared
much more for you
than for your shortcomings.
God forgives you
all your sins.

Now repeat after me.

We accept God's forgiveness.
We accept God's forgiveness.

We take our place in God's purpose.
We take our place in God's purpose.
Amen.

Invitation to the Offering

God, we have turned to you today
for a bit of quiet,
a sliver of sabbath,
a small moment to set down what we carry
as we consider your word.

**And into this minute of rest
you send your prophet
with an axe for the root of the tree,
and kindling for the burning fire.**

Your call to action is surprising.
And we are not always ready.

**Yet we know we must help
build the road
where your people
travel toward justice.**

Our offering is received.

Prayer after Communion

God, what you have planned for us
unfolds slowly.

**Your love is often unrecognizable,
unappreciated,
gentle and unnoticed.**

But in this place
we have noticed
what others do not see.

**We have tasted
your unspoken goodness.
And now we will magnify your love.**

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

CARE: NOVEMBER 10, 2024

Now the Heavens Start to Whisper

Text: Mary Louise Bringle

Tune: SUO GAN, Welsh melody

“Hearts grow soft to welcome him,” sings this hymn, full of God’s care-filled preparation for Jesus’ arrival.

We Come to the Hungry Feast

Text: Ray Makeever

Tune: HUNGRY FEAST, Ray Makeever

God cares for us at the hungry feast, where we learn to care for all God’s people.

Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service

Text: Albert F. Bayly

Tune: BEACH SPRING, The Sacred Harp

As Jesus cares for us, we are sent to care for all God’s people.

When the Poor Ones

Text: José Antonio Olivar, tr. Martin A. Seltz

Tune: EL CAMINO, Miguel Manzano

God is in solidarity with the poor, and when care is provided for those who need it, we witness the presence of God.