

REJOICING ALONG THE WAY  
Corona del Mar Community Church, Congregational

Rev. Mary Scifres  
Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 9, 2018  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

When our son Michael was just 9 years old, his great grandmother Rolla died. He'd been blessed to know this great grandmother, since she was in her 90s when he was born, and he'd had 9 wonderful years of sitting at her feet, playing with his trucks, listening to her laugh at his antics, and hearing her tell stories of talking with him in her dreams. But now she was gone, and even though she'd lived a long, full life, we adults were all grieving as we arrived at the church for her memorial service. Little Michael and his younger cousin Emma both sat outside the church with me, while the other family members were inside finalizing details with B. J. as he helped the pastor prepare for the service for this beloved matriarch who had nourished both B. J. and his father both parentally and spiritually. But for little Michael and Emma, death and Great Grandma's absence were beyond their comprehension. Outside the church, these two young children began climbing around the brick flower boxes. Eventually Emma decided skipping was in order. After all, she was in her prettiest church dress and her cousin Michael was oh-so-handsome in his Sunday suit. As I watched them skip around the church courtyard, up and around the flower boxes, and into the church foyer, I realized that they probably saw this day as a celebration. After all, Michael's suit and Emma's fancy dress were special occasion outfits, purchased for Christmas and Easter, days for rejoicing and celebration. And, so those two wise children rejoiced along the way into that sanctuary, where they then carefully sat politely and quietly through the service, only to return to their dancing and skipping during the reception afterward. Two small children reminded a room full of adults that even in the midst of death, we

are in life. Even in the midst of sorrow, we can rejoice along the way.

Christmas is often thought of as a joyous season; we sing festive Christmas carols and decorate our homes with bright lights and cheery decorations. For some, this is the happiest season of the year; for some, a favorite season. But last Tuesday, I sat in my dentist's chair while she told me how much she hates this time of year. She kept asking for my response, whilst her hands were in my mouth, effectively keeping my opinions silent as she continued to lament all the reasons why she doesn't like the season. Even her Jewish husband thinks she's a bit of a scrooge, she laughed. She's so relieved she doesn't have to celebrate the season she grew up with in her Brazilian Catholic home, because she finds it guilt-ridden and burdensome, rather than joyous and celebrative. So, she's happy to quietly celebrate Hanukkah with her husband and then get past the journey through Christmas as quickly as possible.

Her lament reminded me that Christmas is not always a joyous season. Even people who love this season don't always find the journey to Christmas an easy one. For some of us, it's filled with stressful obligations and overly busy schedules. For some, it's tinged with sadness and sorrow, particularly if we're missing precious loved ones lost through death or estrangement. For some, it's tinged with loneliness and angst, yearning for a family we've never had or a dream that hasn't come true. Certainly the journey to Christmas wasn't a joyous journey for Jesus' parents, who were poor, unmarried, and troubled with an inconvenient and unwanted journey to faraway Bethlehem.

When Zephaniah wrote the words Laura read to us this morning, he was not on a joyous journey either. He was worried about his people, his leaders, and his nation. The Israelites were ignoring God's laws, living in decadence, and largely ignoring their relationship with God.

Worship of God was in short supply, but people were abundantly idolizing other gods, including money and self-interest. Rulers and priests were more focused on their own popularity and pursuit of power than what was right for the people they led. Zephaniah was not happy or joyous about the state of his nation. Most of his prophetic words are words of sorrow and lament, doom and destruction. But even in the midst of his sorrow, he manages to skip back into the courtyard with these last words of hope and joy. Whereas he had been condemning his sister and brother followers of God in previous writings, here he calls them to remember that God hasn't given up on them, even if they've given up on God. He promises that God is still in their midst, still yearning to guide their journey, and inviting them to sing and rejoice along the way of journeying with God.

This is the message those two little children taught me as we walked into Grandma's memorial service that day: God is with us, even in our sorrow. God is with us, even if we don't realize it. God is with us, even if we ignore God. God is with us, even if we reject this truth. God is with us, in our deepest loss and most troubling times. God is with us. Emmanuel. The name first given to Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us. That's what Emmanuel means: God with us. That's what Christmas means most of all. Christ with us. Jesus came to remind us first and foremost that we are not alone; God is with us.

We are not alone on this journey toward Christmas day. We are not alone when we are grieving. We are not alone when we are stressed. We are not alone when we are harried. We are not alone even when we feel our loneliest. God is with us.

We are not alone on this journey toward Christmas day. We are not alone when we are celebrating. We are not alone when we are laughing. We are not alone when we are praying. We

are not alone when we are singing carols or hanging Christmas lights. God is with us.

Whether we are celebrating this season or dreading this season, God is with us. And God is even inviting us to rejoice along the way. Rejoice if this is a happy season for you. Rejoice if this isn't a happy season for you, for joy is a sister to sorrow. The two are intimately connected, intermingled in our lives and in our souls. Kahlil Gibran says it this way:

“Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. . . .  
Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."  
But I say unto you, they are inseparable.  
Together they come, and when one sits, alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.”<sup>1</sup>

Even our beloved Christmas and Advent carols reflect this truth. My husband B. J. and I laugh about our contrasting favorites of the season. My favorite Advent carol is Come, Thou Long- Expected Jesus, set to a major key. His favorite is O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, set to a minor key. Even when we move toward Christmas, B. J. prefers Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming in a minor key; I prefer Angels We Have Heard On High, set to a major key.

The songs in minor keys tend to ask more questions, with the tunes setting a more pensive, introspective mood on the season. The songs in major keys offer more declarative proclamations, with the tunes setting a more confident, celebrative mood on the season. But if you actually look at the texts and reflect on the season, you begin to see that both are needed on this journey to Christmas.

Christmas is a journey, not a destination. And on this journey, we will likely know both good days and bad ones, festive celebrations and lonely days. Joy will most likely be mingled

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<sup>1</sup> Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. Excerpt from “On Joy.” © 1923, 1951 Kahlil Gibran and Estate.

with sorrow in this season of preparation and even in the season of Christmas. Just like the reception at Grandma Rolla's Memorial Service. People wiped their eyes as they shared memories of the beautiful letters she wrote and the compassionate ways she cared; others laughed as they quipped about her sharp criticisms and witty jokes. All the while, two small children skipped around the fellowship hall, Emma stopping occasionally to twirl in her special dress and Michael humming a happy tune. Rejoicing along the way, they remembered a great grandmother who had loved them well and whose love was with them always, just as God's love is with us always, in our joy and in our sorrow, in all of our days both happy and sad. God is with us. Emmanuel. God with us, today and all days.