

Joy in the Midst of Sorrow

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Third Sunday in Advent; Series C

I would like to begin this morning by showing you two images. The first is a painting by Thomas Kinkade



entitled, *Snow White Discovers the Cottage*. Snow white looks on at an inviting looking cottage nestled in a quaint section of the forest with a creek that flows gently from a foaming waterfall and runs through the meadow-like clearing. Wildflowers bloom and the deer and other wildlife roam. There is no hint of concern or danger. Snow White is at peace with the animals and all of nature. It is a picture of serenity. It is a portrait of delightful possibilities. It is a picture of joy.



The other image I want to show you is a painting by Diana Moses Botkin entitled, *Her Choice*. It is a painting that I showed once last Lenten season during one of the midweek services. What a contrast to Kinkade's bright colors and the peaceful scene! In comparison to Snow White, the girl in this painting is scared and frightened. She is huddled in fear. She sits in the dark and the darkness seems to consume her. This painting offers little hope. It is a portrait of despair. The joy of Snow White as she discovers the cottage in the forest is nowhere to be found in this painting. It is a picture of pure sorrow. It is a picture similar to the one that the community of Newtown, CT and the students, teachers, and staff of Sandy Hook Elementary School are trying to sort through right now.

We have two paintings. One painting is pure joy with the absence of sorrow. The other painting is sorrow with no joy. Both of these paintings do a great job of showing the mood that they want their viewers to feel when looking at their paintings. Joy and sorrow are real human emotions that we all feel. But I would like to suggest that neither of these paintings expresses the full emotion that is unique to faithful believers in Christ, you and me. That is because as faithful Christians living in this world we do not live with *only joy* or *only sorrow*. We live with both joy and sorrow all at the same time. It is a tension that we cannot and should not try to resolve. Yet, these two paintings are representative of the temptation to solve that tension by emphasizing *only joy* or *only sorrow*.

I experienced a "tension-resolving" moment on Friday morning. I flipped on the television to watch a Christmas movie—pure joy! As I looked at the TV all I saw was sorrow. There did not appear to be any joy in the faces of devastated parents and crying children that had just been the victims of one

misguided twenty-something's plan of crazed carnage. The feeling of sorrow and grief stirred inside of me and I caught myself reaching for the remote. I wanted to escape the sorrow. I wanted the joy that the Christmas movie had to offer—joy as the absence of sorrow.

If we give in to that temptation to resolve the tension of living constantly with both joy and sorrow by excluding one or the other then we will miss the real message of comfort and hope that God has for us. Then we will miss the way that God would have us prepare for Christmas in this season of Advent. God does not want us to get rid of all the sorrow in our lives in order to have Christmas joy.

The season of Advent in the Church has traditionally been a season in which her members prepare for God's coming through repentance. In this way the season has a tone of somberness and sorrowfulness to it. The exception is the third Sunday in Advent. In the third Sunday of Advent, sometimes referred to as the "pink" Sunday because the color of the candle on the Advent wreath is pink rather than purple, the Church celebrates the joy of Christ. Throughout the history of the Church the day was called *Gaudete* which is the Latin word for "rejoice." On this Sunday the Church remembers that "joy comes through repentance." The Church remembers that the Christian experiences both joy and sorrow all at the same time. Today we are reminded that joy comes in the midst of sorrow. Joy is not the absence of sorrow.

There are three other images we experienced this morning that illustrate joy in the midst of sorrow. These images were not painted for us, rather, we painted them with our imagination as we heard the stories read. Consider the Apostle Paul and his letter to the Philippians. He says to them, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil 4:4). Paul writes these words while he is in prison. Most people do not consider prison a place of joy. If joy were the absence of sorrow then Paul would have no reason to rejoice himself or to tell anyone else to rejoice. Paul has reason to rejoice because he knows that joy is found in the presence of the Lord who is with him in the midst of sorrow.

Or consider John the Baptist. He is the forerunner of Jesus. He came to prepare the way for the King and his kingdom with a message of repentance. And his courage to speak the truth of God's word and call even the King Herod to repentance landed him in prison. From prison he sends messengers to Jesus to ask him if he is the Christ, the Messiah. And while John sits in prison and awaits his death, Jesus brings him a message of joy through the messengers. Joy is not the absence of sorrow but joy comes in the presence of a person who comes in the midst of sorrow.

We can also consider the Old Testament lesson from the prophet Zephaniah. At first, it seems that all Zephaniah has to offer is pure joy, much like the Kinkade painting. The seven verses that we heard from Zephaniah are the last verses of his short, three chapter message. And they are actually the only verses of joy in the entire book. The rest of the book is filled with sorrow. The rest of the book is filled with God's just judgment upon those who have deliberately disobeyed the Creator's plan for his creatures and chased after other gods and idols to worship. Judgment is spoken against God's disobedient people of Judah and Jerusalem as well as those of the surrounding nations. The rest of the book paints a picture

of darkness, gloom, and despair similar to that of the Botkin painting. Yet, in the final seven verses Zephaniah delivers joy in the midst of their sorrow. He speaks of God's judgments against them being taken away and their enemies being cleared away (3:15). Zephaniah gives us a glimpse of Christ as early as six hundred years before his incarnate birth. Zephaniah gives us joy in the presence of the person of Christ who comes to us in the midst of sorrow.

Zephaniah's picture of judgment is a sober reminder of the biblical truth that God rules over all nations and his judgment extends to all, we cannot escape it. But Zephaniah's picture also reminds us that God is still present in the midst of judgment. In Christ, God is present for us in the midst of our sorrow. Jesus is the one who bears God, the Father's wrath for us. As I have heard one person say, "It is the mystery of joy and sorrow in the relationship of the Father and the Son." And through his sacrifice our sin is taken away and through his resurrection to new life Jesus becomes the presence of God in the midst of your sorrow. Joy and sorrow together in the eternal love of God.



I would like to return to the second painting that I showed you at the beginning of the sermon, the Botkin painting. Some of you who were here for the midweek Lenten service last year may already know that I did not show you the full painting. The full painting is not a picture of pure sorrow and despair. It is a picture of joy in the presence of Christ who comes to us in the midst of sorrow.

In our worship, this is how we prepare for Christmas. This is how we prepare all the time for our King who comes to us in his Second coming. In Word and Sacrament and song we hear of, sing about, and receive the Christ who comes to us in the midst of our sorrow. He is our joy. This is a time of year when the world wants us just to be joyful and spread goodwill and Christmas cheer. This is the message we receive in our culture's Christmas movies and music. But there is still another picture that we cannot ignore—a picture like that in Newtown, CT, for instance. Also, at this time of year so many people swim in a sea of sorrow and are on the edge of despair as they think about the death of a family member, the diagnosis of cancer, or the loss of a job. The world's message in Christmas movies and music ultimately offers them no hope because it only offers them joy as the absence of sorrow. Yet, as people who live with the joy of Christ in the midst of sorrow, we are prepared to come to them with a message of hope in whichever portrait they are painting themselves. Amen.