

God Is Singing

Scripture Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7

A trio called Girl Named Tom¹ has made it to the finals of The Voice, a singing competition show broadcast on NBC. These siblings are the reason I'm watching the show for the first time in its 21 seasons on the air – and I downloaded The Voice app and have been voting for them every week.

Why am I interested in this group? Because they're Mennonites from Ohio, the two brothers are graduates of Goshen College – my alma mater, and I “attended” a virtual concert of theirs during the Mennonite Convention last summer.

I'll admit I've become a bit obsessed with them – watching their old videos and a few interviews they've given since the competition began airing. All three siblings had decided to follow in their grandfather's footsteps and become doctors. Now it looks like their year-long break to sing together might be extended. Perhaps none of them will ever make it to med school.

But they view their music as related to the goals a doctor has. “Music is not just a sound, but a feeling,” they say. “Music is innately spiritual, especially when there's harmony involved. We hope our singing makes every human feel important and valued with whatever they're feeling. Maybe they can leave our concerts feeling a little more capable of tackling the adversities they face and a little more thankful for the people in their lives.”²

Our theme for the day dares us to imagine God's song. My early spiritual formation was influenced by acapella four-part singing, so when I imagine God's song, it sounds a bit like the music of Girl Named Tom. Listening to this trio brings me joy. Joy – along with rejoicing and singing – is present in the readings from Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Philippians.³

The prophet Zephaniah begins with judgment against and dire warnings for the Israelites, the people of Judah. But then he promises redemption for the faithful remnant. He calls for God's ancient people to sing after their restoration and return from exile. And then he speaks of God being with them, creating calm with love, and rejoicing and singing over them.

God is in our midst too. God sings over us with gladness. Our rejoicing in God echoes the rejoicing of God over us. Can you hear it? Can you feel it?

The prophet Isaiah also speaks of “that day” when God will restore Judah after the exile. Isaiah promises that they will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. They will thank God and exalt God's name. Even now, while they are still living in exile, they should shout and sing for joy because their great God is already among them.

God is great, and God is here—with us and around us. In what ways is God present among us as a church? How do we rejoice together in the presence and work of God?

¹ <https://www.girlnamedtom.com/copy-of-about-1>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjxZ0cLHRdY>

³ Sources for this sermon include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 14-19; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 24-29; Pulpit Fiction, Advent 3C, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent3c>, and *Leader, Fall 2021*, MennoMedia, pp. 42-43.

In Philippians, Paul calls on God's people to rejoice, not worry, and offer their prayer requests to God with thanksgiving. As with the words of the prophets, this joy in the Lord is tied to God's presence.

God is near to us too. Joy that is rooted in God's nearness can bring peace of heart and mind. Who in your life needs to hear this message? Do you need to hear it?

"Wait a minute!" you might be thinking. "I don't hear or feel God singing or rejoicing over us. I don't see God working. It doesn't seem as if God is present in the world."

It might appear as if Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Paul are in cahoots with the advertising agencies and anyone else who is promoting the holiday season. As we approach Christmas we're bombarded by images and sounds telling us to be happy. But when we look at the world around us and at our own lives, the images we see and the sounds we hear don't always match the ads on TV, the pictures on the Christmas cards, the optimistic tone we hear in the scripture, or the ideal images we have in our heads.

We might feel defeated and sad and say "I should rejoice, I should trust in God. The Bible tells me to do it, so I guess I'll try to trust and be joyful in spite of what is going on in my life and in the world around me."

That's a difficult task. Is it possible to be happy by sheer willpower? Can we decide not to be afraid? Perhaps, but it doesn't work all the time and it's not long lasting.

This morning we're daring to imagine God's song. How do we do that when fear of the unknown, fear of the past, and fear for our health and security entangle and paralyze us? Is it possible to imagine God singing over us during the times we live in? Times of an ever-changing pandemic. Times of violent threats and actions. Times of destruction of the earth by natural and manmade causes. Times of political upheaval and incivility. Times of hatred between people of differing races and ethnicities. Times of insecurity, feeling we are insignificant, worrying that we won't have enough, won't be enough. Times of personal losses: loss by death, loss of health, loss of relationship, loss of job. The list could go on. (It's interesting to note that except for the addition of the pandemic I used this same list in a sermon six years ago.)

It's important to remember that the world situations and life circumstances during the times of Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Paul were tough too. They were experiencing spiritual and national tragedies at least as difficult as ours today.

Isaiah and Zephaniah were speaking to a small nation surrounded by powerful ones. Israel was a pawn in the movements of the great world powers Babylon, Assyria, and others. Foreign armies were a constant threat and sometime reality. Lack of food, water, and the basic necessities of life accompanied this instability. The Jewish people lived in difficult circumstances with minimal rights and privileges.

Paul was writing from prison to a group of people who were being persecuted because of their faith, because of their decision to follow Jesus.

And yet, the instructions for them, and for us, are to trust and to rejoice, to imagine God singing over us. Seems impossible!

Perhaps a key to following God's instruction is in how we continue the sentence that begins with the words, "I will trust and rejoice" The message is not "Trust and rejoice, in spite of the circumstances," but, "Trust and rejoice, because God is here."

How can we put this into practice? Let's begin with the big picture. We could say, "Trust and rejoice, in spite of the terrible world we live in." Instead, let's say, "Trust and rejoice because God is present and working in the world."

When we look at the big picture, we see crises in the realms of health, the economy, climate, politics, violence, and division and confusion in the church. The history of the Israelites included slavery, exodus, wandering in the wilderness, exile, and return. Over the years, Isaiah, Zephaniah, and other prophets denounced their arrogant leaders, their idolatrous forms of worship, and their exploitation and oppression of the poor, the widows, and the strangers.

God's prophets also brought good news of God's deliverance. The God-fearing, faithful people could rejoice in what God would do for them. God would take away the judgments against them. God would turn away their enemies. God would send a Messiah and establish his kingdom here on earth.

During Advent, we read a lot of the prophecies about this coming Messiah. We're fortunate because we live in the time after the coming of this Messiah. We can rejoice because we know the story of Jesus: his birth, life, death, and resurrection. We know that God burst into this world in an exciting way 2000 years ago and that God's kingdom is present in this world right now. In the midst of the very real crises, we can trust and rejoice because God is here.

Now let's move from the big picture to the personal level. We could say, "I will trust and rejoice in spite of what a terrible person I am or the terrible things that are happening to me." Instead, let's say, "I will trust and rejoice because of who I am in Jesus and because Jesus is with me in my trials and tribulations."

We didn't read the fourth of today's lectionary scriptures, Luke 3:7-18. In this story, Luke informs us that crowds of people made the trek out into the wilderness to find John the Baptist in order to be baptized by him.

And how did he greet them? By angrily calling them a brood of vipers. These people sought him out and he responded by warning them not to come only with a desire to be baptized. This isn't some "get clean quick" scheme. According to John, water isn't enough; what is needed is a total change of heart.

John didn't speak nicely to those who came to him. He attacked their notion that because of their spiritual heritage, because they were Abraham's descendants, they had a special claim on God's favor. He warned them that no purification ritual could guarantee their innocence and safety on the Day of Judgment. He threatened that they would be judged religiously worthless unless they displayed the authentic fruit of a changed life.

Amazingly, John's harsh talk didn't send the crowds running away. Instead, they asked him what they should do. Some of his answers were for specific people, but in all of his answers the emphasis was on sharing possessions, using one's goods to benefit the needy, and treating others fairly, justly, and with mercy. He concluded with the good news of the coming Messiah, one who will baptize them not only with water, but with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Trusting and rejoicing are preceded by repentance. It might not be possible to imagine God singing over us unless we repent.

Repentance is turning around, turning from wrongdoing, changing one's ways. It's about choosing a path of righteousness to follow and making the adjustments required to stay on that path. It's about choosing to live in right relationship with God and with each other.

Repentance is a change or adjustment of mind and heart that leads to a change or adjustment of behavior. The specific behaviors that need adjusting might be different for each of us depending on our circumstances and our personalities, but they will always include sharing what we have and treating others justly and with mercy.

We can imagine God singing over us because we have new life through Jesus Christ.

It's especially hard for those who have experienced loss and are grieving to trust and rejoice during the Christmas season. How can a person's perspective change in this situation? Instead of saying "I should trust and rejoice in spite of the losses I have experienced in my life," a person might be able to turn that around and say, "I will trust and rejoice because the peace of God is guarding my heart and mind.

Think again of the verses from Philippians: *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.*

Joy comes from the presence of God. Even in prison, Paul was full of this joy. He told his readers to rejoice even though he knew they were experiencing persecution. This joy doesn't depend on external circumstances but on the friendship of God and fellow believers. This joy doesn't come from worldly credentials and successes but from viewing life as God's gift in Christ. This joy is a source of peace and comfort in a time of loss.

It's possible to not be weighed down by anxiety, whether in the big picture or on a personal level, because God is near. Some scholars think this phrase, "God is near," is about timing. They say that "The Lord is near" means "Jesus is coming again very soon," so trust, rejoice, and treat others gently in preparation for his coming.

Other scholars think that "The Lord is near" is about proximity. It means "God is present and attentive to us" so don't worry. Take your needs and your gratefulness to God in prayer.

Both of these are true. Jesus will come to us in the future. Jesus is here now. Both can be sources of joy in the midst of fear and loss.

Whether we're looking at the world, the nation, the community, or at our personal situations we aren't asked to deny tragedy or difficulty, instead we acknowledge them. We aren't asked to simply accept tragedy or difficulty; instead we do what we can to change them.

Whether we are looking at the crises in the world around us, at our own shortcomings, or at our personal losses, the redemptive work of God in Christ is the basis for trust, the basis for rejoicing.

We trust and rejoice because God is present, Jesus brings new life, and God's spirit brings peace and comfort. God is singing over us.

This is good news! Thanks be to God!