

Homily: Sing for Joy

I heard a story about hearing God’s voice. The person wrote:

“I only heard God the one time. It was a rainy winter night that saw the temperature drop suddenly. I was driving with my three children in the back seat when I heard, ‘Pull over right now.’ I did, and the car that had been behind me spun out and did a 180, ending up nose-to-nose with me.

The next few cars slid off the road or spun around and though no one slid into us or seemed to get into much trouble, I felt we had been saved by the voice of God. I didn't tell anyone for many years and have only shared it with a few very close friends who were believers.”¹

Speaking about spiritual things comes with caution in a world that is less open to spiritual conversations. That’s a place of shadows and darkness.

We’re on a journey to the manger to meet Jesus, the prince of peace.

We begin our journey in the dark, lost and without a clear path. God speaks to reassure, guide, alert and talk straight to us. God sent someone to make things right – that’s the promise to Jeremiah (33:14-16). The Messiah comes to deliver us from the trap we fall into: going our own way. There’s a light in the darkness. It’s a spiritual light that has the power to change the world as we know it. It lights our spirit on fire.

Then God spoke to Malachi. God said, *“the Messenger of the Covenant, the one you’ve been waiting for. ... He’s on his way!”* (3:1c, MSG). The messenger, John the Baptist in Jesus’ time, comes so we’re prepared for Jesus to come into our hearts and minds. The messenger helps us navigate along the way. The messenger helps us to refine and purify ourselves so we’re more faithful; ready to accept Jesus for whom he is: the Messiah, the Savior. That’s good news worth sharing.

Today, God tells us what the journey will be like.

There’s a new pairing of prophets: Zephaniah and John the Baptist.

We don’t read the words of Zephaniah often. He was a minor prophet speaking to people returned from exile in Babylon and Egypt. He spoke to people trying to regroup and figure things out after their captivity.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/when-god-speaks>

Life was difficult. It was a time filled with uncertainty and change. The political leaders and temple priests weren't doing their jobs very well. There wasn't anyone who could show them the way with clarity.

The message applies to us, as we're certainly living in a time of great uncertainty and change, given the political, economic, social and ecological state of the world. It's a remarkable message, given the challenges the people faced. It was part of Hebrew scripture in Jesus' day. Listen to this version of the song of Zephaniah 3:14-20 (MSG):

“So sing, Daughter Zion! Raise the rafters, Israel!

Daughter Jerusalem, be happy! Celebrate!

GOD has reversed his judgments against you

and sent your enemies off chasing their tails.

From now on, GOD is Israel's king, in charge at the center.

There's nothing to fear from evil ever again!

Jerusalem will be told: ‘Don't be afraid. Dear Zion, don't despair.

Your GOD is present among you, a strong Warrior there to save you.

Happy to have you back, he'll calm you with his love

and delight you with his songs.

The accumulated sorrows of your exile will dissipate.

I, your God, will get rid of them for you. You've carried those burdens long enough. At the same time, I'll get rid of all those who've made your life miserable.

I'll heal the maimed; I'll bring home the homeless.

In the very countries where they were hated they will be venerated.

On Judgment Day I'll bring you back home - a great family gathering!

You'll be famous and honored all over the world.

You'll see it with your own eyes - all those painful partings turned into reunions!' GOD's (YHWH's) Promise.”

What a promise it is! John the Baptist picks up on it. The Messiah is coming, ready and able to forgive us and heal the world. The way won't be easy. There will be unexpected turns and hair-raising incidents.

We're going to want to go our own way, following selfish interests.

But, if we listen for God's voice and pay attention to our navigators,

we'll find our way. It's simple: when it doubt, turn to God, even if it seems like we're on ice, spinning 180 degrees.

Life isn't just about the destination. It's about how we live on the journey. I invite you to join Zephaniah & me in singing with joy!

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for your promise. Thank you for always being there when we turn. Forgive us when we ignore your messengers, trying to find our own way. Show us the way to live life filled with the wonder, awe and contentment. May we celebrate every day we are with you, singing with joy in our heart. We pray this in the name of the prince of peace, Jesus. Amen.

Luke 3:7-18 (CEB)

Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”

The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”

Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?”

He answered, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.” With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.