

# “From Sentimental to Sacramental Joy”

**Text: Zephaniah 3: 14-20**

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**Rev. Benjamin Broadbent**

## ***Rev. Broadbent:***

So I'm moving through my Advent, concentrating on waiting, measuring the excitement of the season; and I get an email. The subject line: "Five Precepts From The Zen Hospice Project." And the third precept is "Don't wait." And the description: Patience is different from waiting. When we wait, we are full of expectations. When we are waiting, we miss what this moment has to offer. Worrying or strategizing about what the future holds for us, we miss the opportunities that are right in front of us.

It's one of those moments when these two ideas collide, and I think, "Well, is this a place where Christianity and Buddhism are fundamentally different? Perhaps. Or is this a moment where a word from one faith offers a gentle correction to the trajectory of another faith?" Don't wait is the precept.

In a sense, that's what we embrace on Gaudete, "Joy Sunday." We say, "You know what, I've had enough of this waiting. The joy is uncontainable, and we're going to light a pink candle and just rejoice."

The prophet Zephaniah wrote at a very difficult time in the history of Israel. He was writing to the northern kingdom, which was being surrounded by and fought over by various imperial empires, and they were wondering what their fate was going to be. And in Zephaniah's estimation, the leaders were making all the wrong decisions. If there was a right decision to safeguard Israel, the king was not making those decisions.

And so he is very critical. This is one of the bleakest writings among the prophets, writing about judgment and about doom and about how the actions of the Israelites are going to bring on their own defeat and despair and destruction. And so why are we reading this on Gaudete Sunday? Because the end of the book is the Song of Joy.

Scholars are fairly unanimous in thinking that this last piece, this Song of Joy was not written by the same person that wrote the first section. It was probably written at another time, after the Israelites had already gone into exile, probably shortly after they had returned. Their fortunes had been restored, as we hear, and the Song of Joy resounds.

Zephaniah's full name was Zephaniah Ben Cushi. "Cushi" means from Africa, Cush being another name for Ethiopia. And so Zephaniah, the son of Africa, is railing against the Israelites, and his story ends with words of punishment. He

**From Sentimental To Sacramental Joy**  
**December 17, 2006**

was not yet ready to celebrate or to urge joy. But the people of Israel's fortunes were restored, and so there was the opportunity to celebrate.

And what we learn from reading this prophet is that joy is something that is shared among a people. And it is something that is all the more magnified when we have gone through together a period of adversity. And finally it shows us that joy, deep joy, is something that ultimately connects us to a greater humanity. Not just the group of people of which we are a part, but it creates a new relationship with those other groups that are part of a wider humanity.

The way I might put this in our own context is that joy can be seen as a continuum between sentimental and sacramental joy. "Sentimental joys" are those simple, isolate, and fleeting joys that we receive all the time, every day, and they are very important. They are sometimes the only thing that keeps us going. Just those moments of connection with family or with friends, a bit of laughter, a recognition of "this is just right just the way it is."

But "sacramental joy" is that deeply, embodied joy. Sacramental, meaning that which shows forth the holy. Sacramental joy is that which is shared among people and magnified in our sharing. That which is born of a period of struggle, adversity, maybe even despair, and that which connects us to a greater humanity.

When I think of sacramental joy, I cannot but think of my and Brooke's labor to bring our now 16-month old baby Marin into the world. I don't know that I've actually spoken of this at length in a sermon or children's message, but that labor was — and Brooke has her own story, I'm just telling mine — it was, for me, the most agonizing experience.

I don't know if you know this, but Brooke and I labored 47 hours. I know that's not the longest labor on record. There have been longer, and I pray for those people, but it was agonizing. She went into labor at midnight on Saturday night, and six hours went by. And 12 hours went by. And I started to think, okay, now isn't this about when this should be happening? I mean, I was thinking maybe 8 hours or so. And after we left 8 hours far behind, we started moving on fully into the next day. And then night fell. It had been now 18 hours. And then 24 hours, and we were not making the progress that I was expecting. I had never been told in my Bradley course or in any of the books that we had read that things could go on this long.

We went to sleep after 24 hours, more or less sleep. We woke up the next morning, and we were still in the thick of it. This was still going on, and that's when I lost it. Sleep deprived and worried beyond anything I had ever known, I was beside myself. The midwives were encouraging me to take a little nap. To actually leave Brooke and take a nap. That was one of the hardest things I have

**From Sentimental To Sacramental Joy**  
**December 17, 2006**

ever done. And I'm grateful to Nancy Henjum, who visited me late that morning at a time when I was completely beside myself. And she said, "What is it that's most worrying you?" And I was able to say it exactly. "I am afraid that both Brooke and the baby are going to die." That was it. And I was completely not in control.

And Nancy's wonderful words to me were, "Ben, women's bodies are made to do just this. Brooke, right now, is doing exactly what she needs to do to bring this baby into the world. And she's going to be fine." That was just what I needed to hear to go back in to where Brooke was laboring. This all happened in our home. And I went back in, and Brooke noticed my tear stained cheeks, and in between a contraction said, "What's wrong?"

And I said, "I know this is just going on too long. How long can we do this?" And she listened to me and said, "I'm okay. I'm doing this. I'm okay." I think she thought I was thinking there was something she didn't know about. But she knew what she needed to know.

What we realized later was that Brooke took on, of course, the bulk of the physical labor, and I took on an emotional labor that I had never taken on before. So she gave me a pep talk and went back into another contraction.

At 10:37, we were all in the bathtub, and one last push, and Marin popped into my hands. To be honest, I didn't catch him very well, but I was the first to touch him, other than Brooke. And we cried again. Joy. Joy through adversity. I was in a moment of despair. I was beside myself. I was totally out of control of the situation, my own emotions. That is perhaps the labor that man, or any birth partner, must go through. The joy of the waiting and of the struggle and of the fear which finally results in joy. And I know not every labor results that way. Ours, God willing, did.

And it was a shared joy. Brooke and I in that moment felt more connected – we talked about this later – than at any other moment in our relationship, perhaps, save, only that moment of recognition when we realized how much we cared for each other.

So, joy that is shared is magnified. We know that this congregation was praying for us on that Sunday morning; and you and we had many more hours to wait. But we knew that we were being held in prayer.

It's also a joy that offers an incredible connection to a greater humanity. I mentioned this when I made an announcement just after he was born, but I spent days amazed by women, even girls, and wanted to say to every single one of them, "Thank you. And especially on behalf of all of the men who would never say anything like this. And, in fact, treat you with the opposite respect

**From Sentimental To Sacramental Joy**  
**December 17, 2006**

that you deserve. Thank you. Thank you for everything you do to bring about life.”

I called and cried with my mom on the phone, feeling a connection I had never felt with her before. Thank you for what you did. Not that you could have chosen some other means to go about it, but just by the sheer strength and knowledge of your body, here I am, and all of us are – that shared joy, that wider connection.

Zephaniah described to his own community the adversity and the struggle that they were going through together. It was a shared joy when the people were restored to their land, their fortunes. Their identity, most important, was restored to them, and through their exile, they received a greater sense of connection to the wider world. The reading that Jackie read talks about that those from beyond Ethiopia, beyond Cush, would come and would bring their offerings to God. Joy is that which shatters our sense of who we are and makes us deeply connected, beyond who we are.

And that kind of joy brings about a profound humility. It’s that wonderful humility when something happens and you are filled with that sense of contentment and resolution and joy and you just go, “phhhhh, yeah.” I never could have devised this on my own, and yet here I stand. I thought I would have much more to do with this result. And really, I’m just a bit part in God’s great play that brings this on.

God’s joy connects us. Bishop Tutu writes that “In our African language we say, a person is a person through other persons.” “A person is a person through other persons.” I would not know how to be a human being at all except I learn this from other human beings. We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of inter-dependence. For we are meant to compliment each other. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental law of our being. Not even the most powerful nation can be completely self-sufficient.

The joy of realizing that inter-independence is what we acknowledge today. We acknowledge that God’s joy is not something out on the horizon, that we just need to take a few more steps in order to catch a glimpse of God’s joy lurks in our midst. It’s behind the door. It’s hidden in the unmarked box from unmarked box to unmarked box. From cell to cell, it’s there in the now. And so I return the precept, “Don’t wait,” because God’s joy need not be waited for. God’s joy is waiting for us.

Amen.