

Welcome

I don't know about you, but I've reached that point in my holiday season where I'm just about out of holiday cheer. The other day, I was talking with my wife, Amanda, about a couple of possible events we had coming up. I asked her, "What do you have going on this date and this date?" and before I could even tell her what I was asking about, she said, "Say no. Say we're busy."

We walk a delicate balance every year on this road to Christmas: we're in nearly constant movement between preparation and celebration, back and forth from parties to shopping to pageants to decorating. And it can get so exhausting that we sort of lose the reason for all this in the midst of it.

So today is designed to be a big, deep breath. A chance for us to come together and rejoice, celebrate together. Whether it's the party plans we've got to get to later or the real work of justice we know God is calling us to as a part of our Advent journey, we need to stop and remember that everything we're doing is in response to the God who has already accomplished the work of saving us.

So let's begin this day of rejoicing by singing together!

Message

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Though for our culture, the Christmas season begins on Black Friday (or maybe the day after Halloween), in the Church, we observe the season of Advent.

Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. During Advent, we put ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the Messiah. By waiting in Advent, by choosing a season of simplicity before the Christmas celebration, we learn to watch for the small, simple work of God we overlook in the hustle and bustle of the holiday season.

Advent is a season of proclamation, too. While Israel waited, God sent prophet after prophet to say, "Hang in there... God is at work. Something new is coming." The prophets help us see God at work.

This season, our Advent series is called "Raise Your Voice". We're going to look at how God has called each of us to speak up. What does it mean to bear witness to God's good work - in our lives and in the world?

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, how is God inviting you to speak up? Yes, you. Right in the middle of where you are. This series, at its heart, is about recognizing that God is with all of us, inviting all of us to speak up, to be bold, to share who God is making us to be.

We began with the reality that many of us don't feel *qualified* to speak up for God. We called it "imposter syndrome". And we saw through the stories of Zechariah the priest and Mary the mother of Jesus that God calls us to speak up right where we are, no matter who we are.

Last week, we saw that, though we all come from different places, God calls IN those places to speak up. And by attending to where we are in God's story, we can hear how God is calling us to speak up, how our places shape our stories.

This week, I want to address the fatigue that often sets in when we work for justice. You know what I mean: now that we're connected instantly with people not just across the nation but the world, we have an endless barrage of things to care about from natural disasters to acts of terror to the murder of journalists to the refugee crisis to #metoo... and that's just scratching the surface.

In fact, if you take what we've been talking about for the past couple of weeks seriously, if you really dig in, understand who you are and who God is calling you to be, how God is calling you to speak up *right where you are* because of who you are, then you hit this fatigue pretty fast.

It's easy to get depressed at how many evils seem to abound in the world, and at how powerless I am to do anything about them.

So I have some strange advice for you today: When you're starting to feel overwhelmed or despairing: it's not up to you. Relax. Take a deep breath. And rejoice.

I know that's not what you expect to hear during Advent. This is a season of prophecy and proclamation. We're preparing the world for the return of Jesus!

But on week 3, right in the middle of the season, we light a pink candle - different from all the others. As a reminder that even in the midst of our proclamation and preparation, we have to rejoice. Because ultimately this isn't our work. It's *God's* work.

[Scripture Slide] Writing to God's people as they longed for their Messiah, the prophet Zephaniah said,

Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

For the LORD will remove his hand of judgment and will disperse the armies of your enemy. And the LORD himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will never again fear disaster. On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be,

“Cheer up, Zion! Don't be afraid! For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.”

“I will gather you who mourn for the appointed festivals; you will be disgraced no more. And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones; I will bring together

those who were chased away. I will give glory and fame to my former exiles, wherever they have been mocked and shamed.

On that day I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name, a name of distinction, among all the nations of the earth, as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes. I, the LORD, have spoken!" -- Zephaniah 3:14-20

Right in the middle of the command, the prophet says, "'Cheer up, Zion! Don't be afraid! For the LORD your God is living among you.'" The Hebrew that gets translated "Cheer up" is actually, "Don't weaken your hand." The language comes from a person plowing a field, their hands gripping the handles of the plow, breaking up dirt so the soil can receive seed and be fruitful.

That's how it often feels when we're doing the work of justice - that the hearts we're speaking to are hard, that people don't want to listen - they're unwilling or too busy.

So the prophet says, "Hey! Tighten up that grip! Keep plowing that field! You're doing good, necessary work!"

This is a powerful message for those of us who get worn out, beaten down or discouraged by the good work we want to do. And even more so for those of us who get discouraged by the good work we wish we were doing. Those of us who are so busy checking off the next thing on our to-do list we can't even think about speaking up for larger issues in our community or in our world.

But how do we tighten our grip? According to Zephaniah, we Sing! Rejoice! Don't be afraid!

Not, and this is important, because everything was already hunky dory. Far from it. The people of Zephaniah's day were still aching for God to come.

But the prophet's instruction to them is to rejoice!

Taking time to celebrate in the midst of our work isn't a waste of time. It's not a distraction from the important stuff. It's part and parcel of the work itself.

We have to stop and rejoice along the way. Because when we do, we remember that this is God's work, not just ours. We didn't start the project of redemption. God did. And we're not the ones responsible for finishing it either. God is.

So we can take time to rejoice. Celebrate. And by doing so, we strengthen our grip on the plow and get back to work.

Now it's the holiday season, which means a lot of us are thinking, "Yeah I'm basically celebrating non-stop. Between office holiday parties, neighborhood get togethers, C-Group Christmas, kids' holiday pageants, secret santas and more, I'm getting in plenty of rejoicing."

A lot of us are doing so much rejoicing it's killing us.

Which begs the question: is what we're doing really refreshing us? The whole point of rejoicing is in the word itself: We're "re-joying" ourselves. We're reconnecting to the core of God's love for us and promises to us. We're re-centering ourselves in our true identity: children of God, heirs of God's promises, the children of the Christmas story: God with us.

It's entirely possible, to go through celebratory motions without truly celebrating. Doing what we've always done simply because it's what we do between Thanksgiving and Christmas, with no real mindfulness, and no real rejoicing.

Parties, pageants and gift exchanges become chores rather than blessings. They become leisure rather than real rest. Especially during this time of year, if we want our rejoicing truly to connect us back to the joy of Christmas, the joy that comes from God with us, we must be mindful.

Kathy Khang offers for steps to this genuine joy: Rest, Restore and Readiness.

(Read pp70-72)

It seems selfish, particularly in a season so focused on giving to others, to talk about taking time for ourselves. But the reality is that the work of proclamation before us is tremendous. It's truthfully an impossible task - if it were something we were accomplishing only on our own.

Which is why the prophet commands us on this third week of Advent to rejoice! Take time to celebrate, to truly rest, be restored and ready for the proclamation of the good news of Christmas.

Even Mary, when she learned what was ahead of her, took time away. Can you imagine the chaos of Nazareth, when Joseph and his family learned she was pregnant outside of their promised marriage? And yet she left for three months, went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth. Why? It was good for her spirit. She needed to rest, to be restored, so she could be ready for the road ahead of her as the mother of God's promised Messiah.

We have important work to do in the days ahead - both as we approach the last couple of weeks of preparing for Christmas and, in a larger sense, as we consider how God is calling us to be agents of justice and hope in our world.

It's easy to get discouraged by how hard the soil is, by how much work remains to be done.

It's in those moments we need to rejoice. Because ours is not the work to finish. Jesus is the one who will finish the work he started on that first Christmas.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Our reminder that God has already done the work. We can rejoice because God is with us!

Assignment + Blessing

Rejoice this week. Rest. Be restored. Ready yourself!