

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20
ISAIAH 12:2-6
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7
LUKE 3:7-18

Third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete
December 12, 2021; Year C

Don't Worry! Be Happy!

“Here’s a little song I wrote; You might want to sing it note for note; Don’t worry, be happy! In every life we have some trouble but when you worry you make it double; Don’t worry, be happy! Don’t worry, be happy now!” According to Wikipedia, where all truth and sources of knowledge are just lying in wait, ready and willing for you to access and feed your mentally starving mind, Indian mystic Meher Baba, who lived from 1894-1969, oft used the expression **“‘Don’t worry, be happy,’** when cabling his followers in the West. . . .” The popular expression was printed on inspirational cards and posters during the 1960s, a time when such blather would have been well received by those peacenik flower children of the hippy movement. Yes, in 1988, Bobby McFerrin **“noticed a similar poster in the apartment of jazz duo Tuck & Patti in San Francisco,”** a city where everyone supposedly wore some flowers in their hair. McFerrin **“was inspired by the expression’s charm and simplicity,”** and **“wrote the song”** that would become a one-hit wonder, **“included in the soundtrack of the movie *Cocktail* and became a hit single the next year.”** The popular song was eventually covered by several musicians, not including the iconic Bob Marley who ironically is credited with producing a version of the song. He died seven years before it was released! Interestingly, and as a curious sidebar, as you may recall, the only instruments in the original a cappella rendition of the song are made up of entirely overdubbed voice parts and sounds, all produced with an overemphasized fake Jamaican accent.

But perhaps the real inspiration behind this beautiful song, captivated in all its marvelous simplicity, came from the lyrical writer of Philippians. Scholars strongly presume that it was definitely the theologically creative and gifted composer, none other than the prolific letter writer extraordinaire, the self-appointed Apostle Paul who penned these profound words. Paul, who made up a lot of Christology by the way, that is, theology pertaining to Jesus the one called Christ. Yes, it was the former Pharisee who crafted these positively optimistic words to the church at Philippi, who in his supposed infinite wisdom tells the Philippian congregation, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God,” who may or may not ignore them, may or may not answer them, at least according to our specifications. Yes, that last part is not from Paul’s hand. I added that caveat to offer a dose of realism, a sobering thought needed when our prayers, for all intents and purposes, seemingly or realistically seem to go unanswered. The rest of Paul’s musings in this short lection specially selected for our reading consideration and, yes, enjoyment, today is to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice,” joy, Gaudete, being the operative word on this liturgical day, the very meaning of which is “Rejoice!” Paul concludes, continuing his optimistic theme, “and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Good luck with that! How’d that work out for you? Don’t worry! Be happy!

Once again today, we read texts carefully chosen for the Revised Common Lectionary, scripture that seems counter intuitive, complete counter narratives, a complete 180, to much of our reality, narratives that reflect the inconsistencies and polarities of biblical promises and proportions, and all of it juxtaposed in opposition to our life experiences. Shifting from the epistles to the Gospels, Luke tells us, while issuing words of judgment calling everyone to account, threats

bespeaking unquenchable fire as described in the sternly dire warnings of John the Baptist, we also, as if in the same breath, read promising words of hope that proclaim good and gracious, great and glorious, tidings of the greatest joy, that God's presence is coming and will joyfully reside in the midst of a people longing for a sense of the transcendent holiness, holy mystery that we indeed associate with the Divine. At the risk of misusing some clinical adjectives, these narratives have a certain bipolarity about them, a kind of schizophrenia, sending mixed signals, convoluted messages, that only serve to confuse, confound, and to complicate the complexities of our already scattered lives. Just what are we to believe? Which verses are legitimate, sacrosanct? Which ones are false, outliers and should be avoided or ignored? Is fact masquerading as fiction or vice versa? What is true and what is truth, the difference only seemingly subtle, but seriously significant. Is the glass full or empty, half full or half empty? Inquiring minds want to know. We need some resolution. We need answers, yes, answers to our temporal, right here and now questions, along with whatever curiosity we might have about eternity!

Perhaps the answers are found according to where we sit, all determining where we stand along with what we see and hear. So, on this day among these special days, these high and holy feast days, festival days indeed, holidays, pregnant days conceived with anticipation and expectation, brimmed with excitement, I choose to choose the most optimistic route I can take, the most positive outlook I can muster. Hey, after all, it cannot hurt! After all, we all could use some good news! The thing that I try to remember when I read these seemingly false positive texts is that all these reflective narratives were written during the crucible of the most trying of circumstances, recalling the most difficult of times. When we read from the Hebrew Bible, epic, legendary, fanciful, even fictional, stories, highly exaggerated and embellished, all designed to describe the amazing

adventures of the Israelites, we are reading narratives recalling a people's trials and tribulations as a community, a nation struggling to maintain civic and ritual purity on a national scale while living among a host of what they now considered foreign cultures, peoples who did not value nor care about Israel's strange theological mutation in their evolving monotheistic understanding of God nor their peculiar sacred covenant, the laws that ordered their lives and gave them a profound sense of meaning. None of their neighbors cared about the concerns of a people who believed they had been chosen, specially selected for great things, no, not in the least. In some ways it might can be argued from a clinical, sociological, standpoint, that it was the communal hubris, the corporate narcissism, of this "special" people that brought so much anger and hostility, so much vitriol, upon them. That, along with the fact that these wandering Jews seized their new land by violent conquest, coercive occupation, taking what was not theirs for the taking, doing to others in the name of their God, Yahweh, the very thing they had accused their adversaries and despised in enemies who did the same to them. Never throw rocks in glass houses! Yes, what goes around comes around. It seems that we read somewhere in holy writ about doing unto others what we would have them do to us. I am just saying! When we choose to read these mythical stories objectively and contextually, rather than through the biased, the prejudicial, opaque lens of our strongly slanted interpretations, blindly reading this biased recollection of tales as factual rather than narrative or salvation history, in much the same way we would read a novel, epic fictional tales based in factual events like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Gone with the Wind*, or the *DaVinci Code*, we are quickly then able to see clearly the flaws and failures, the foibles, of an insular, insecure, fearful and anxious, palpably paranoid, people. We can objectively critique those whose actions were deplorable but were politely sanitized by their biographers who went to great lengths to defend their deplorable survivalist behavior, their horrific actions, all in the name of their God. In so doing, we can also begin to see the cracks in the armor of what

became holy writ, sacred scripture, the canonization of ancient manuscripts always fraught with danger, no matter which or who's holy book we are describing. To the victors belong both the spoils and the stories. Nobody ever bothers to ask what the indigenous Canaanites thought about being unceremoniously dispatched from their land, rounded up in much the same way, just like our native American brothers and sisters who first lived on these shores. They too were treated miserably as they marched their trail of tears, categorized and compartmentalized, segregated from the rest of us interlopers, despite their heritage, a great legacy, proud in every way as true American citizens. As we read from "our" Bible, we do not have the luxury or privilege to read the Canaanite version of events as they once unfolded, the way it really went down, are not privy in the least to the atrocities that were inflicted on this unsuspecting people, they equally special in their own right as children of God created in the divine image. Canaanites, et. al., and native Americans, both indigenous groups, were right in their resistance, rightly justified in their last stands. Both causes were just, no matter the glamour of revisionist history or the imprimatur of permanence apologist words defending mass slaughter, attempted extermination, all printed for perpetuity on sacred page for generations to read and benignly accept like bobblehead lemmings, believing that these heavily slanted accounts truly amounted to the way it really was. Allowed to enter their world, privy to their experiences, their perception of reality, we owe it them to approach their stories with integrity, fairness, and grace. With those caveats in mind, it is easy to acknowledge that the Israelites' fame and fortune, their manifest destiny, came at great cost, and misery was often the payoff they received for their efforts. **Yes, we know that when we read these wonderfully sympathetic and affirming one sided narratives, we are reminded that the prophets who proclaimed these promises were living into their glimpses of hope, propping up a populace that had an amazing propensity for being downtrodden, distressed, and despondent.**

And so it is when we read the Christian scriptures, as we are introduced to a people inflicted with their own high and unique level of despair disguising the slightest modicum, even an ounce, of a hopeful attitude, including their absolute disgust as they reacted to the abuses regularly inflicted upon them by their angry and vengeful religious and civic neighbors. We can to some degree relive, be a witness, empathetic and sympathetic to their frustration and anger that was totally justified in every way. Imagine trying to carve out a new niche of faithful living when you are despised by your forebears, rejected by the very faith tradition pregnant within you, that birthed you and nurtured you and then ironically birthed in you in your new faith perspective as well, even as you chose to step out and bravely become a radical follower of Jesus, comfort zones not an option, not a part of the agreement in this life and almost certain death transaction. Imagine being kicked out of your ancestral house by your brothers and sisters, your spiritual siblings, a home that had informed and impacted your spirituality, the belief and faith instilled in you in your allegiance and fidelity to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the sacred covenant ordering your life. Imagine feeling betrayed by those closest to you, fellow worshippers you thought you knew well, in whom you placed the compromised vulnerability of your greatest trust. These were your fellow parishioners who you trusted and with whom you broke bread, those with whom you had an up close and personal, the most intimate communal relationship we build outside of family and close friends. Suddenly, you were singled out as they sold you out! You were temporarily homeless! And to make matters worse you were now a target, sacrificed by those same family and friends, now conveniently branded and hated by the occupiers of your nation as you sought to some degree to honor and obediently toil under the rule of Caesar's Roman Empire, knowing full well to whom your true allegiance lied, now quickly blamed for any and every societal ill that may befall and thus punished accordingly,

becoming everybody's scapegoat. Once again, in 70CE, Jerusalem was completely leveled, utter devastation, the sequel, a redux, here we go again! Once more, the newer version in the less opulent Temple had been raised and was now razed to the ground, once again reduced to a pile of rubble. Into the vortex of all these catastrophic occurrences, came the soon-to-be proclaimed biblical writers, first with their promising epistles and then followed by the fancifully mythological Gospel composers, the sum, the totality, of which became our canonized Christian scriptures. **It is in this sobering context that we read words of promise and hope, words of peace and yes, joy, Gaudete, rejoicing, and all of it birthed in the gracious goodness of a loving God who is always present even when life sucks. Therefore, the Apostle Paul can proudly proclaim to his Philippian audience this word of encouragement, admonishing, cajoling, them, perhaps even demanding from them, that they "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice." In Paul's usual demonstrative declarations, we recall the stark reminder that it is always easy or easier to praise God, to give thanks to the Holy One, when life tosses us the proverbial bowl of cherries, but it is a far different matter, coloring a very different perspective, when we are persuaded to give thanks and praise even when life seems at its worst, its "suckiest!" Recalling the fate of Job, when and where our lives intersect with his abjectly distressing misery, it too is when our world appears so very out of sorts, and everything seems so out of kilter as these unlimited challenges swirl around us, so far beyond our limited control. It is into the whirlwind of this vortex, these crucible moments, when we struggle to express any praise and thanksgiving, offer any complimentary words, any flattering adjectives, toward God, blame being unspoken but never far away from our minds' thoughts, somehow always subtly assumed somewhere in the subconscious. Flowery vibrato, churchly vocabulary, the vernacular of the steeple, a language all its own, just seems to get stuck in our throats when we realize the fragility of our very existence. The biblical characters had**

their crosses, indeed, just as we have ours. Not so ironically, it cements our connectivity to them as we read the stories of their perceived experiences with life and with God. It is the tie that binds all of us down through the centuries, yes the one thing that we definitely most have in common. Misery was misery in the first century and misery is still misery in the twenty-first century. Pick your poison! But, my friends, so is our joy! The same principles apply, the same can be said about the nirvana inherent in this life. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!” Yes, in the midst of the requiems of our predicaments, thank God there is always a Te Deum of gratitude and glorification in the offering.

Some would argue that this approach to living is simply too Pollyanna, pabulum that sounds like something proffered from a snake oil salesman, selling any number of platitudes of a pathetically pitiful pious prophecy. How dare we parrot simpleton responses that deny the abject catastrophes of the crucible realities that test our mettle, stretch our resolve beyond capacity, and most of all directly challenge the veracity of our belief and faith in God, each other, and a better day. Me thinks this assessment is fair and probably accurate, a worthy argument that can easily be won if considered at face value. Think of the horror of this weekend’s violent storms in the South and lower Midwest with historic carnage, destruction, and a death count that continues to rise. You don’t think the victims did not pray for their safety? Yes “stuff” happens! But in these texts that we have the audacity, to dare call holy, and in these sacred moments in sacred space, we acknowledge that we are not speaking of what we know and experience here in this life on this planet earth. We are not talking about the facts of the matter, for in our holy, sacred conversations, fact is always informed by faith and by faith we choose to walk, not necessarily ignoring what we see and hear, reality as it is and not what we wish it were, even what it appears to be in the moment, but always remembering that mystery indeed is always mysterious, the essence of utter and absolute transcendence,

and is therefore always the uncommon denominator in the sacramental mix, the eternal qualifier that steels and steadies our ability to be faithful in times of testing, trials, and tribulations, fear and anxiety. And so yes, we can own the difficulties of this life, able to embrace the disease, all the derogatory slings and arrows that confront us and seek our demise, surely expecting our downfall, anticipating our destruction and death, metaphorically and literally. Yes, we can own all the negative residual attached to this life, all part and parcel of human living, human being and doing, because we believe that there is something in the mystery of the universe, the serendipity of a divine energy, that changes not only our equilibrium, but curves toward an equation that brings balance, that levels the score in this life while bending toward, pointing us in the right direction to embrace whatever next things might be, whatever horizons, the new day that is always not yet, but is always to come, this, the very essence of the main theme of the Advent season. Yes, the sooner we can recognize that God's favor, as with Mary of old in her predicament—oh, what a sticky wicket, what a pickle—is with us in the midst of life's most difficult and challenging times, rather than hoping and praying that God will deliver us from them, the better off we will be emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Whatever God is, whatever constitutes transcendent Holiness, the very essence of divine mystical presence, a sensory awareness that produces awe and wonder, we know from life experience, the proverbial school of hard knocks, that God is not a divine rescuer, and neither is Christ Jesus. The very human man from Nazareth, despite his embodying, best illustrating, incarnational substance, fully embodying presence-of-God traits, thin places where human meets Divine and Divine meets human, Jesus cannot and will not exempt us from life and living, the proverbial box of chocolates, you get what you get, but will walk beside us and stand with us in all our triumphs and tragedies, especially in the dark valleys of the shadow of death in whatever forms that agony takes. Zephaniah, Isaiah, Paul, and the Lukan writer, our lectionary guides for the day, all were able to

keep their integrity while not making promises they could not keep, offering words of comfort and joy, knowing that the earthly result for many would not turn out so good, not so much, and in fact would frequently consist of great suffering along with an agonizingly painful death at the hands of a merciless, heartless, unconscionable, enemy, an adversary hellbent on wiping their assumed foes right off the planet.

The best and the most we can affirm and confirm, is clearly enough to sustain us for the living of these days, as we take precious time to stand still in these holiest, sacramental, moments gathered together in sacred space for the most important thing we do as a congregation, the corporate worship of God, is to readily acknowledge that we are not alone, that we have one another as beloved faith community, church family if you prefer, and that God is with us, mystically in the mix, in the midst and the middle of all our magnificent machinations as we find meaning, movement, and momentum for the living of these days, whatever happens during them, good, bad, or ugly, warts and all, and all as blessings because of every breath we are privileged, gifted to take. And so we can affirm, proclaiming with the Apostle Paul that God is and we are, and that my friends, is good news, Advent news, promising news of hope, peace, joy, and love, expectant and expecting news ushering in birth and rebirth in the coming of the Christ child and additionally in the myriad ways that the Spirit of Christ, first manifest in the very real person of Jesus of Nazareth, comes to us again and again and again in subtle and stark ways that are nothing short of miraculous. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!” “Now there, is this song I wrote; I hope you learned note for note; Like good little children, don’t worry, be happy; Now listen to what I said, in your life expect some trouble; When you worry you make it double; But don’t worry, be happy, be happy now.” I could not have said it better myself!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and really and truly wants us not to worry but to be happy! Amen and amen!