

Made for Joy

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Isaiah 12:2-6

Have you ever tried doing a job with the wrong tool? We probably all have stories about this. I have dozens. Like the time I was making a souffle and my mixer died. Whipping egg whites to stiff peaks by hand is not for the faint of heart! Or the time I tried fixing a fence line, but the wire stretcher was nowhere to be found. I was trying to pull the wire tight with my bare hands while securing it around the post and tying it off all at the same time. Or the time when I earned the nickname lightning. I had been drafted into service putting siding on a cabin, using a hammer and nails and could never hit the same place on the nail head twice, hence the nickname. My boss came along next to me with a nail gun and did the same job in a fraction of the time, without being mocked for poor aim. And please tell me I am not the only person who, out of necessity has attempted to use a flat head screwdriver on a Phillips head screw. Tools are made with a specific function to perform. When the appropriate tool is not available or the tool is used incorrectly, the task either increases in difficulty or becomes impossible.

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." While there are elements of this catechism that don't align well with Anglican theology, this introductory statement hits the nail on the proverbial head. We were made to glorify God. --But what does that mean exactly, "To glorify God"? To give glory to something is like highlighting what is true about it. It's praise, but it's more than that. When we think about all the things we appreciate most about God, it's finding ways to make those things visible to the world, even removing the barriers people experience that keep them from seeing the truth about God's glory. -- Imagine God in the eucharistic elements. If the room was dark and there were no windows, lighting a candle would help

others see. And then, if someone else turned on his flashlight and someone flipped on the light switch, everyone would be able to see what had previously been veiled. That is what it means to glorify God. To use our light to highlight what is true about the Lord.

The thing I love so much about this piece of the catechism is that it indicates that the way we glorify God is through our enjoyment of God. Think about it. When we really love a thing, the people around us hear about it. --- For example...“You have to try the new coffee shop that just opened, they make the best cappuccinos”! Or, have you heard this amazing song? The latest movies, our favorite books, the dog breed we think is best, our favorite brands, etc, etc. Humans are the best marketers because we do not feel our joy is complete until we have shared our joy in a thing with others. So, when the catechism says that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever,” we can conclude that the best way to glorify God is through our deep enjoyment of God...because that enjoyment will spill over, highlighting God’s glory for the whole world to see. We change the world, we heal the world, through our enjoyment of God.

The problem is that we live in a broken world, and this world’s brokenness has formed us. We are made of God, and we are designed for the purpose of enjoying God, but this world has lost its identity through its brokenness. Humans designed in God’s image, made for the purpose of enjoying God, have been tricked into believing that enjoyment can be found apart from God. It’s like trying to fill a hungry belly by eating candy. The warped pursuit of fulfillment and joy has our society on the exhausting treadmill of dissatisfaction and disappointment. The increasing hunger builds a frantic energy towards the pursuit of something that only ever leaves us increasingly desperate. I love the quote from Krishnamurti that says “it is no measure of good health to be well adjusted to a sick society”.

Which is why John's message shouldn't sound so ironic to our ears. The last line of Luke's account indicates that John was offering the people "good news", but gosh, it sure sounded harsh. The winnowing fork in Jesus' hands and the fire feel threatening and foreboding. That image comes from an ancient agricultural practice. Farmers would take the grain that was encased in protective chaff, and they would beat off the inedible chaff and then toss it in the air where the wind would blow it away; thereby separating the useful meat of the grain from its useless outer coating. It's a harsh visual for us, but a normal practice in their world. ---When John tells the people to share the **extra** they had with others, and the tax collectors to stop using their power to greedily extract more from the people than was required, and the soldiers to stop using their force to steal from the people to satisfy their cravings for more, he was essentially telling them that the pursuit of excess is chaff. John tells them that their claims on religious superiority were equally useless. If the people's lives weren't marked by the morality of generosity and equity, all their religious acts were worthless. In the ancient world, useless extra chaff and non-fruit bearing trees were burned to make room for what was harvestable and useful.

We were created to enjoy God and to proclaim that joy. ---Our broken world runs on consumerism, especially during the holiday season. It trains us to keep our attention fixed on what we don't have, what we wish we had, and makes us ever hungry to satisfy ourselves. But we are made of God, and we cannot be truly satisfied if God is not enjoyed by us and others. If our neighbors are hungry or cold, we glorify God by sharing from our excess, allowing all of us to joyfully experience God's glory. If anyone is suffering mentally or emotionally from the way this broken world had damaged them, our confidence in God's goodness through our joy can help light the path for them to find their way back into their own enjoyment of the glory of God.

Zephaniah and Isaiah both claim joy in God. Their words invite those who are suffering and those rejoicing to remember God's faithfulness and look to the future fulfillment of God's promises. Paul reminds us that, while our emotions are not always something we can control, joy is a choice we make. The practice of joy involves honest prayer and requests to God, but joy is marked by thankfulness. Joy is a way of bringing our consciousness of God to every experience. It reminds us that God is here and working even when we can't see it. And that confidence is what transforms the practice of joy into the feelings of joy.

Advent is a perfect time for us to take stock of our hearts. Are we people who practice joy? If we're feeling discontented, frustrated, stressed, or uncomfortable, we can ask ourselves why. We were created to be God's instruments of joy in the world. If we aren't feeling joyful, if we aren't regularly shining a light on the glory of God through our practice of the enjoyment of God, perhaps it's because we've become flat head screw drivers trying to work on a Phillip's head screw? All of us get distracted from our true purpose occasionally.

Isaiah says to make God's deeds known, to sing praises, and cry aloud with our joy. We really are very good at selling others on the things we love. The authors of our Scripture knew how powerful the human experience is when shared with others. Marketing companies know it too! Our choice to highlight the presence of God, to enjoy God and tell others the stories of God's goodness to us, can be so powerful.--- The holiday season is not one that feels happy to everyone, but the story of God who came among us to love and deliver us, is THE most profoundly joyful story of all time.

May we be a people who spend our lives in pursuit of the enjoyment of God and may our joy in the Lord shine a light into the darkest places so that everyone can see and be fulfilled in our purpose to glorify God by enjoying God forever. Amen.