

Joy – Third Sunday in Advent

December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3:14-20

In the mid 1960's, a man named Daniel O'Keefe began celebrating a holiday he created for his immediate family. He called it "Festivus". It was supposed to be a reaction to the commercialism of Christmas. It was a little bizarre.

Daniel O'Keefe's son became a comedy writer and was hired to write for a show called, "*Seinfeld*". One day Dan O'Keefe was telling his coworkers about his father's holiday. The coworkers found it to be so humorous they decided to include it as part of an episode which aired in 1997 called, "*The Strike*".

The episode featured that year's Festivus celebration. The instigator of the celebration was George Costanza's father, Frank. The centerpiece of the celebration was an undecorated aluminum pole. The celebration included a meal and during the meal there was an event called, "The Airing of Grievances". This was an opportunity for all those who were taking part in the celebration to tell each other what things they found irritating about each other.

The climax of Festivus was "Feats of Strength". One participant was chosen to wrestle the head of the household (Frank). Festivus would only end if the participant could pin the head of the household to the floor.

The show caused something of a sensation. People actually began celebrating Festivus. Communities and organization held and are still holding Festivus events.

I bring this up because one of the roots of the name Festivus is the Latin word "festus" which can be translated as "joyful". Today is the Sunday in Advent we celebrate joy.

Our lesson today comes from the book of the prophet Zephaniah. There really isn't much that makes Zephaniah stand out from the other prophets. In fact, like all the other prophets, Zephaniah includes an "airing of grievances" from God. It seems that a real prophet would include God's message that his people consistently and grievously messed up.

In the first two chapters of Zephaniah, the prophet shares all the reasons God has for condemning Israel and all of its enemies. The peoples have all ignored God and his commandments for living. They have turned their backs on God and deserve nothing but desolation and destruction.

The third chapter of Zephaniah, however, becomes a time of celebration. The airing of grievances is over and the sharing of Good News begins. The people are told to rejoice!

First of all, we read that, "The Lord has taken away the judgements against you." Instead of disaster, God gives forgiveness.

The second item of joy is the promise that God has “turned away your enemies.” That’s followed by the proclamation that God “will renew you in his love.” And the fourth ingredient for celebration is the promise of God that “I will bring you home.”

Zephaniah’s message is a message to rejoice. We find an even greater reason to rejoice in the message of Advent.

God cares about us so much that he sent his Son into our world. Christmas is the celebration of his birth. But there is so much more than a birth story. The story of Jesus includes his words of life and his deeds of care for all people. But the story also includes the ultimate “feat of strength”. After being tortured and crucified, Jesus is raised from the dead and assures us that no one can ever pin God to the floor. Our celebration of God’s love and the joy it brings can never be ended.

Advent also assures us that Jesus will come again and all grievances will be wiped away. We will one day be freed from pain, violence, tears and grief. Jesus promises us that he will take us home.

And Advent assures us that God is with us now. In his Word made flesh and in the celebration of Jesus’ holy meal we know that Jesus is with us now and will be with us always. We can celebrate today and every day the joy of living in the love of God.

Our lives can still be full of pain and grievances. I’m sure you won’t argue that. But even in the midst of struggle we can find joy.

I’d like to go back to the message we heard two weeks ago from Habakkuk. Habakkuk shared this:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will *rejoice* in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

We have hope in the midst of struggle. We have peace in the midst of turmoil. We have joy in the midst of sorrow. We have love.

And Love is the theme of the 4th week in Advent. AMEN