



THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

GIVE ME A SIGN!

December 13, 2009

Pastor Mark Nieting

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Grace, mercy, peace, and on this "Pink Candle Sunday, JOY be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.... amen.

Since we are in what is called "the most wonderful time of the year," it's only natural that we have to ask ourselves WHY. WHY, when we're rushing around like Pac-men on steroids spending our country single-handedly out of the recession, are we willing to attached the word JOY to these few weeks of the calendar? I have a question for you:



(start powerpoint)

Here's the question: what does JOY look like?

Let's look at some of the SIGNS OF CHRISTMAS.....



I'm sure some of you would feel joy in receiving one of these, right?



And how about a year's supply of this?



What Christmas is complete without THIS kind of joy, right?



These are endorsed by Michael, not Tiger!



Some of you might find a fresh supply of joy in these, now that the price has dropped quite a bit.



They're sure pushing these on TV, complete with the big bow on top, and the monthly payments will bring joy to any checkbook, right?



THIS is a sign of Christmas? But.... is it enough?



(SANTA) Now we're getting somewhere. THIS is a true sign of Christmas, right? After all, a lot of our Christmas "joy" IS found in getting.....and receiving presents.

But see how it goes with the kids when you tell them that this year Santa is forgetting all about gifts and is giving out hugs instead! At Christmas true JOY isn't found in a hug from the dude in the red suit, it's more often in unwrapping the latest 'whatever is hot' and under the tree, isn't it?

The Bible paints a totally different picture of JOY. Let's see what it looks like:



It's a picture disconnected from the symbols of status and wealth and divorced from the images of piled up presents and possessions.

(end powerpoint)

That's not to say that these things are BAD..... giving gifts is great. It's fun! It's a wonderful way to show that we love someone else. Receiving them is great too. And when those gifts are actually NECESSARY, USEFUL and PRACTICAL, they can bless us with stability and that's not a bad thing at all.

But that's not joy....at least it's not Biblical JOY. And since we are "People of the BOOK, Bible people," it's good to reflect on just HOW "our book" talks about real "Pink Candle" joy, and especially this morning, with the words of Zephaniah.

Zephaniah, the author of our text, is one of the more minor of the 12 "minor prophets" in Scripture. He lived at the same time as the prophet Jeremiah did, during the reign of Josiah, about 640-609 BC, which was *after* the northern tribes had been carried away. We remember Josiah as one of the better and more faithful kings of Judah, but when he came to the throne at the ripe old age of 8, almost everything about his country was in chaos and corruption: the government, the priesthood, the temple and the worship of God's people. His country was falling away from God, and it took years before Josiah was able to make any changes for the better.....and ultimately, all Josiah's work failed.

I suppose Josiah....and Zephaniah too.....felt the same way about their country that many of us do about ours today, that those who love the Lord and

honor His Word were being pushed out of the mainstream and replaced by those whose “hearts were far from God.” It certainly doesn’t take much work to see what’s happening right around us with all the persistent attacks against our faith and the efforts to remove Christ from Christmas. It would make Zephaniah feel right at home. It’s why God instructed him to speak up and write down his message.

The Book of Zephaniah is all of 46 verses long, arranged into 3 chapters. It begins with a brutally honest reminder to the people of Israel that they need to turn away from all the false ‘gods’ that they have been worshiping and to say goodbye to the secular signs of success and prosperity that they pursued. The prophet warns them that if they fail to do so, all that they thought was so important would “fade away” and they will be subject to God’s judgment.....and when God’s judgment came on them, there would be no joy whatsoever!

The first 2 ½ chapters of Zephaniah are filled with words and phrases like “*I will sweep away,*” “*I will cut off,*” *weeping, wailing, shame and woe,*” words that echo Jeremiah, Amos, Obadiah and many other prophets as they urged God’s people towards repentance and faith.

But at the end, in his closing words to his people, Zephaniah gives them a glimpse of real “God-style joy. He paints a beautiful word-picture of a time when men and women will “shout aloud” and “sing for joy,” and it won’t be because they’ve piled up tons of money or achieved levels of success. He talks about a time when God’s people will shout and sing in praise to Him because all their sins have been taken away.....and when they will “be glad and rejoice” with all their hearts, a true “pink candle” time, if ever there was one on this earth.

And where does this joy come from? What does it really mean? It comes from knowing that God has really come into our world, forgiven our sins, and adopted us as His people!!! The “reason for the season” is the joy of knowing that Jesus came into our world

The truth is that most of the things that we like to label as “*life’s joys*” are really just temporary pleasures: they come and they go, sometimes very easily. They make us feel good only for a moment or two. A brand new car only smells new for a month or two and before long we’ve inflicted the first scratch and it begins the slide towards the junkyard. A lot of our “joys” at Christmas remind me of the man who bought his wife a beautiful diamond ring for her gift. A friend of

his asked him later, "I thought she wanted a new jeep?" "She did," he replied, "but where was I going to find a fake jeep?"

Christmas is the arrival of real and true joy, the kind that can't be taken away. It comes in the words of the angels to the shepherds, making sure that they know that there is ONE true sign, one real SYMBOL of joy. You know the words: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today, in the city of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a SIGN to you: you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2: 10-12) The beautiful thing about a "Christian Christmas" is that unlike everything else in our lives, our Christmas will never get old and will never need to be exchanged.

I'm not trying to be a *Grinch*, of course. It's not that giving gifts, putting up decorations at home and in church and throwing parties are a bad thing. We just have to remember that they are *temporary* things. As Christians, what makes us different isn't so much *HOW* we celebrate Christmas, it's *WHY* we do it and for *WHOM* we do it. It's where the true source of our joy comes from.

A Christian Christmas Community is filled with people who work hard to bless others. It's about parents who try to do our best for our kids and grandkids. It's about singing our favorite carols and tearing up watching the little ones recite their lines at the Sunday School program. It's people who give each other great gifts and sing our favorite carols. It's about visiting the nursing homes and sending cards. But we *don't* do it to create our own joy and toot our own horns, we celebrate in response for what God did for us that very first Christmas when He sent His Son into our world to bear our sins and be our Savior. We celebrate because God has given us a Savior, and His name is Jesus.

AMEN!

