

**Sing it Like you Mean it – Confessing the Carols
Joy to the World - Zephaniah 3:14-20, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10**

Well brothers and sisters are you ready for Christmas? It is December 22 and there are only 2 shopping days left if you open presents on Christmas Eve... 2 ½ days if you plan to run out to Petro Canada at the last minute on Christmas morning...

Now I hope this information doesn't cause a panic attack for anyone who still has a lot of shopping left to do, or baking, or decorating, or cleaning, or sending Christmas cards – now that we can actually put them in mail again.

If you are stressing out while trying to get all your Christmas preparations done it takes all the joy out of activities - doesn't it? Scrambling to get prepared for Christmas at the last minute is not enjoyable, at least I certainly don't enjoy it!

What I do enjoy is the Christmas Eve Service "After-Party" if you will... when everything is done and finished and I can relax and enjoy hanging out with people who were involved in

the service, and we can talk and laugh - about what went well and what didn't quite go the way it was supposed to – but.... at least nobody else noticed, and so on.

And of course, I always enjoy the food and drink that is involved with celebrating Christmas! And I've been known to enjoy getting a gift or two here and there as well occasionally giving some. Maybe you can relate?

So brothers and sisters what it is that you enjoy? What brings you joy at Christmas and what are you willing to put up with... in preparing to experience that joy?

Does it give you joy to see the look on people's faces, especially children, when they open a gift from you? If so then you will endure crowded malls, frazzled cashiers, and slushy parking spots in order to get those gifts.

Or is it the joy of reuniting with family and friends? If so you're willing to pay the high ticket prices and put up with the hassles

and inconvenience of airports or bad roads during the holiday travel season. You know what I'm saying??

Now, if I was to bump into you at the store in the next two days while I'm trying to finish my shopping... or if I happened to catch you coming back from picking up guests at the airport and I said "Happy holidays to you!" I think that would be a bit out of place, wouldn't it? Not because I'm giving a generic greeting at Christmas time – but because crowded stores and airports are not happy experiences are they!

Happiness is when everything around you is nice and pleasant and there isn't anything weighing on your heart or stressing your mind... but preparing for the Christmas season is anything but that.

So, I think it would be more appropriate to bless you by saying "May you have a Joyous Christmas!" because in spite of the fact that you just stepped into an icy puddle of slush and got a "soaker..." there is the anticipation of the Joy that is coming when you see little Timmy eagerly open that gift from you on

Christmas Eve or Christmas morning and watching his face light up!

And it's these things that we enjoy, which give us joy, that makes it worthwhile having to scramble at the last minute, and endure whatever stresses inevitably come with preparing for Christmas, right?

And brothers and sisters, the scriptures understand joy in a similar way. Biblical Joy is what you feel when something you have been waiting for, anticipated, and longed for and suffered for... finally comes to pass.

Maybe you've been waiting to graduate, or you've been longing to find a special someone to build a life and have a family with. Maybe you are eagerly anticipating grandkids, or retirement... or a Federal election! And when these things finally happen - it gives us Joy!

And the longer we have waited and anticipated, the more we have suffered and endured for them – the greater the Joy.

And this dynamic is the key to understanding what we are confessing when we sing *“Joy to the World”* like we mean it. So, let’s turn to our scripture reading from Zephaniah this morning as we examine what this carol is all about.

Now it’s pretty easy to see that Zeph 3 passage is about joy isn’t it? We read things like *“Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!”* (vs. 14) and *“He [Yahweh] will take great delight in you... he will rejoice over you with singing.”* (vs. 17) So there is no doubt this scripture passage is about joy!

And we should take notice in this passage - joy gets expressed! In this way joy differs from happiness. Happiness is kind of quiet and content – nothing wrong with that – but you don’t hear people *“Shouting for happiness”* do you...

You do however hear people shouting for joy, singing for joy, and rejoicing with all their heart. Joy is expressed physically and audibly – especially great joy.

And the joy which Zephaniah is prophesying about occurs when Yahweh’s promises of a return, a restoration and a rebuilding of the exiled Jews, who were exiled for their covenant unfaithfulness, finally come to pass and are fulfilled!

Zephaniah prophesies that some point in the future Yahweh will; *take away punishment and turn back their enemy* (vs. 15), *that He will be with them as their King* (vs 15), *remove what is a source of shame to them* (vs 18) *he will deal with their oppressors* (vs 19) *he will bring them home – e.i. rescue the lame and gather the exiles* (vs. 19-20) *and he will make sure they are honored and praised publically* (vs. 19-20) *and He will restore their fortunes* (vs. 20).

And when this finally happened in 539 BC, when a remnant of Jews lead by Nehemiah was given permission and funding by the Persian Empire to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple – indeed there was great joy, and Ps 126 was written!

So when Ps 126 says *“When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then*

our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; Then they said among the nations, The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us; We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, As the streams in the South. Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting...” You can hear echoes of Zephaniah’s descriptions of singing and shouting in this Psalm.

And in fact the writer of this Psalm used the exact same Hebrews words for *“restoring fortunes”* that Zephaniah used.

So, this confirms that the Levites who wrote this psalm believed their return in 539 B.C. was a fulfillment of God’s promises which were prophesied in Zephaniah.

So, we can call this kind of fulfillment of God’s promises a Level 1 Material fulfillment of God’s promises. Because it was experienced in very specific, tangible and quite literally “concrete” ways as the Jews rebuilt their city and the Temple.

And there are lots of times in our lives when Yahweh takes these sorts promises from the scriptures and does a Level 1 Material fulfillment of them in our lives as well.

Maybe we can point to a specific example in our lives where we have been spared from the consequences of a foolish decision, or even a sinful action; as a Level 1 Material fulfillment of God’s promise in vs. 15 *“The Lord has taken away your punishment...”*

Or maybe a bully at school or work who had it out for you – had their antagonism turn against them, that could be seen as a Level 1 Material fulfillment of God’s promise in the second half of vs. 15 *“he has turned back your enemy.”*

And when this kind of fulfillment happens, it calls for singing and the expression of great joy! The Jews certainly praised Yahweh in 539 B.C, we read about it in Ezra 3:11 *“all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”*

So brothers and sisters what sorts of things are going on in your life right now that would be Level 1 examples of Yahweh fulfilling the kinds of things He says he will do in Zephaniah?

And... are you expressing your joy back to Yahweh in worship?

Now you don't have to write a Psalm – but you do need to let that joy out somehow. Shout, sing, dance, turn up the praise tunes on the radio, be here – at 10am and sing your heart out! Sing it like you mean it certainly means to sing for joy!

But brothers and sisters, as great as this was, it was only a Level 1 Material fulfillment. Returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple wouldn't resolve the deeper issue of Covenant unfaithfulness that had sent them into exile and caused the destruction of the Temple.

That's why Ezra 3:12 goes on to say – *“Yet many of the priests and Levites... who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid...”* It was not a restoration of the former glory of Israel and King Solomon.

And so too – the joy that we feel with a Level 1 Material fulfillment in our lives is somewhat bittersweet as we quickly realize it doesn't do away with our day to day trials, challenges, struggles and our sinful nature.

The truth is brothers and sisters we need a Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment, and the Jews who resettled their land quickly realized this as well.

Something more was needed if they were going to experience the fullness of all what Yahweh had promised to them in Zephaniah and throughout the rest of the Prophets.

So, they began to look for the coming of the Messiah to truly fulfill the promises of the Kingdom of God and to restore the full Glory of Israel as it had once been.

Brothers and sisters, we need to realize that when we experience a Level 1 Material fulfillment in our lives we understand this is how God is at work to prepare us for, and

increase our anticipate of greater things, deeper things – spiritual things...

And it's also how we come to recognize the manner in which God works to bring those greater things to pass. Which, given the biblical dynamic about Joy, means that the Joy we experience will also be even greater!

But the Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment can still be a bit confusing if we don't understand what the Messiah was really coming to do – He wasn't coming to restore the old glory of Israel, He was coming to begin the new glory of a new Israel.

Let me give you a few easy examples of how Jesus as the Messiah fulfilled the Messianic promises of Zephaniah in a more profound spiritual way than what materially anticipated.

Jesus takes away our punishment (vs. 15) by bearing it upon himself in his death on the cross. Jesus turned back the enemy (vs. 15) by first refusing to give into Satan's

temptations in the desert... and then he turned back death itself in his resurrection from the grave.

He dealt with our oppressor (vs.19) by taking on our sinful human nature in his incarnation and turn into a faithful human nature...

He rescued the lame (vs.19) by healing them, he gathered those who had leprosy and healed them and this allowed them to return to their homes and restored their fortunes...(vs.20)

He performed miracles in the name of Yahweh and so Jesus showed the people that their God still honored His relationship with them, and that in his very person their God was with them and had come very near to them; *"He shall be called Immanuel, which means God with us"* (Matt 1:23)

These Level 2 Spiritual fulfillments have very real concrete ways of being fulfilled in our world, but... these actions of Jesus are getting to the very root of the problems.

What a blessing – in fact Paul says exactly that in Ephesians 1:3 *“we are blessed with EVERY SPIRITUAL blessings in Jesus Christ!”* And the birth of Jesus is a good time to remind ourselves that all the Level 2 fulfillments Jesus accomplished would not be possible with His incarnating birth.

So, brothers and sisters, how are you experiencing the Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment in your life in the form of these Spiritual Blessings we’ve received in Jesus? Are you living in His grace, mercy, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and His fruit and gifts?

Are you claiming your Baptism, do you need to be Baptized, are you eating at the Lord’s table? As you participating in the Body of Christ, the Church?

Because brothers and sisters, we must admit that we are not often very joyful over our spiritual blessings that the Lord has given us, it’s so easy for us to become consumed with wanting to see our day to day problems and trials get taken care of in Level 1 material fulfillment, we think that’s were our faith really inspires us and makes a difference in our lives.

No doubt we need this – but... only focusing on this basic level will can cause us to miss the deeper aspects of God’s fulfilling His in our lives which are actually more important for us

And... tragically we allow any unfulfilled Level 1 material aspects to diminish the expression of great joy that should come from the fulfilled Level 2 Spiritual promises that have come to us. How can I be glad about salvation when....???

Brothers and sisters, if this is the case then we may need to ask the Lord, as King David did in Ps 51:12 to *“Restore unto us the joy of your salvation...”*

However, that is also an indication that there is still a Level 3 Kingdom Fulfillment that must take place.

For all the spiritual blessings we have received, we are very aware that we still struggle with our sinful nature... and we can’t simply write off the fact or denigrate that the Level 2 spiritual fulfillments need to come to full expression materially.

As we know too well this world is still affected by death and disease and sickness, natural disasters and famine, corruption and war and those who follow Jesus Christ are persecuted and sometimes killed.

Now we might think that this would diminish the joy of our salvation – however, as we read in 1 Thessalonians this morning it is possible that in the midst of all this, we can still experience Joy. Paul says that they received the spiritual blessings of the gospel *“in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”*

You see brothers and sisters, when we must struggle with our sin, and face the brokenness and tragedy that still exists in our world, and when we must endure times of persecution - the Holy Spirit can and will give us a “Joy” advance.

This joy is borrowed from the coming Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment that we are still waiting for.

It is the Joy we will feel in the future on the day when we see Jesus Christ face to face, when we have been resurrected, made new... when we become aware that the effects of sin have been completely eradicated from our heart, mind, soul and body... When this world and all that is in it made new...

Can you imagine that Joy!? It's not just a greater Joy it is an all surpassing – unspeakable Joy!

And the Holy Spirit can borrow from that Joy and gives it to you now as an advance, a deposit of what is to come. We can't produce it, it doesn't come from our circumstances...

We just receive it and experience it and are strengthened by it and we are able to persevere because of it, thus as Nehemiah 8:10 says *“the Joy of the Lord (who will keep his promises, and it brings him Joy too) is your strength!”*

That's why the Thessalonians were Joyful in the midst of severe suffering, and... this is what we are confessing is

possible when we sing the carol Joy to the World, this is what Joy to the World is all about.

It is a Carol that connects to Christmas by framing the first coming of Christ, his Birth as a Level 1 and 2 - Material and Spiritual - Fulfillment that is still looking towards a Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment yet to come, so this is why we needed to look at the scriptural history first.

Because if you think carefully about the words of Joy to the World you will realize there are no references in it to Christmas... at all.

There's nothing about shepherds, or angels, or Joseph or Mary or Bethlehem or Wise Men or gifts... so how did this hymn end up as one of our all-time favorite Christmas Carols?

Well – let's wrap up the message this morning and prepare ourselves to sing Joy to the World by answering that question.

The lyrics to this hymn were written by Isaac Watts in 1719 and this is the first carol in our series that was originally written in English.

Isaac Watts was a minister who was also prolific hymn writer, responsible for such classics as *O God our help in Ages Past* and *When I survey the Wondrous Cross*. Watts wrote Joy to the World as theological poem about how Christ had fulfilled and would yet fulfill the Messianic promised in Psalm 98, 96:11–12 and Genesis 3:17–18.

He published it in his book titled *"The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship."* It was not set to any particular musical score to begin with but could be sung to any common meter tune.

One hundred and seventeen years later, in 1836 a Boston music teacher and Presbyterian hymnist by the name of Lowell Mason set these lyrics to the music that we are familiar with. He had it published it during the Christmas season – and

that is how it came to be known and loved as Christmas carol, even though it has no references to the events of Jesus' birth.

Instead Joy to the World describes how Christ's birth is both a Level 1 and 2 Material and Spiritual fulfilment of scriptural promises while at the same time prompting us to look forward to the day when His return will bring about the Level 3 Kingdom fulfilment to the entire creation.

The lyrics speak of Earth receiving her King... and the very creation – rocks, hills, fields and floods will sing... the curse on creation will be undone – thorns will not infest the ground any more, and Christ will rule the world and all the nations with truth and grace.

And when this occurs – the promises of Zephaniah that we've read about will also receive their Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment as well.

The Lord Jesus will deal with our oppressors and persecutors; He will turn away the enemy and throw the Devil and his demons into the Lake of Fire;

He will be close to us – we will see Him face to face; He will gather all those who have been purchased by His blood and He will bring us home – the home that he has gone to prepare for us – the New Heavens and the New Earth!

And we can't fully imagine the joy of that occasion – but by the grace of the Holy Spirit, as we sing about it this morning in a carol like Joy to the World, we can receive a Joy advance from it, to give us Joy in spite of our present circumstances and to increase our desire to see the Lord return so that our joy may be complete.

So my prayer brothers and sisters is that in hearing about these promises from God's Word this morning, and being assured of what is going to take place in future because of what has been accomplished in the past... Christmas has come, so we know that Christ is coming.

So let's get the band back up here now, so we can sing Joy to the World this morning, and may the Holy Spirit give you the JOY you need to be strong and endure in the present as we wait for the future.

Brothers and sisters be strong in the Joy of the Lord! Are you ready? Let's sing it like we mean it! Amen