

“Give Me a Sign”
Zephaniah 3: 14-20
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Here are several questions for you:

What does joy look like? How would you describe it? How might you paint a picture of it?

If you had to come up with a universal symbol, a kind of catch-all image for this universal experience and feeling that we call joy, what would it be?

Is it a mother holding her newborn child? I will never forget the first time that I held our baby boy Brian and the joy I felt. I then experienced that joy once again two years later with the birth our baby girl and holding Becky for the first time. That also was pure joy.

Maybe it's the huge grin of a groom when he catches a glimpse of his bride walking down the aisle on their wedding day? Pure joy.

What about the shouts joy from fans when their team finally wins it all? As a life long White Sox fan, when they won the World Series in 2005 that was a joyful time for me.

It was also a joyful time to witness the Chicago Blackhawks winning the Stanley Cup in 2010 after 49 years. And can you imagine the joy that Cub fans will experience when they finally once again win the World Series? How long has it been now? ¹

Joy is an interesting emotion. It's tough to explain and difficult to put into words, yet, when you see it, it's unmistakable and when you feel it, it's unforgettable.

We have all seen it. We have all felt it. So again, how might you describe this thing called joy? What would you say is the *symbol* of joy?

¹ The last time the Cubs won the World Series was 1908, a hundred and four years ago.

Some people would argue that coming up with an all-encompassing image of joy is a lot easier than you'd think. In fact, some would say we already have one. It's called the *dollar* sign, and — if you think about it — they may be on to something. After all, who hasn't thought that hitting the jackpot in Vegas or being set for life by winning the lottery, wouldn't that bring about some big-time joy?

Yes, from the excitement of your first paycheck to that feeling when you find a \$5 bill stuffed in a pair of old jeans, it's hard to argue against the emotional influence of money. Right or wrong, the almighty dollar just might be the *best* sign for joy.

What does joy look like?

Many people consider Christmas to be the most joyful time of the year. One popular tune says it's the "hap-hap happiest season of all."

We think we can ensure Christmas joy by charging our credit cards with gifts for others in order to spread an abundance of presents around the Christmas tree.

Don't ask Clark Griswold from *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* about Christmas joy; he'll tell you about his lack of joy because of missing his Christmas bonus.

Try telling the kids that this year Santa is forgoing gifts and instead is just giving out hugs. Or tell your kids, your parents, or even your spouse that you have purchased a cow from the Heifer project and donated it to a needy overseas family in their name. See what kind of response you get.

At Christmas, joy isn't found in a hug from Santa Claus in a red suit; we think it's found in un-wrapping an X-box game system, an I-Pad, a Kindle or a Nook, or the sleekest fastest 4-G Phone; or maybe even a new car with a big red bow.

Here's the problem. The Bible paints a very different picture of joy. It's a picture disconnected from the symbols of status and success and divorced from the idea of piling up possessions and stuff. That's not to say those are bad things in and of themselves.

Giving gifts is great, receiving them is *really* great and money is, in God's world, often a means for temporary peace and stability, blessing and fulfillment, and that's fine, as long as we realize that these things do NOT produce joy, certainly not what we call "biblical joy."

Zephaniah is one of those under-read and under-appreciated Old Testament prophets. He kicks things off with a brutally honest reminder to the children of Israel of their need to turn away from the other earthly "gods" they've been going after and to say goodbye to the other signs of success they've been striving for.

If they fail to do so Zephaniah says that one day all the temporary joys we have been chasing will fade away, and it will be time for a nasty but necessary day of judgment.

In the closing words of his God-given message today, Zephaniah offers an incredible picture, a beautiful glimpse of real, biblical, God-style joy.

He speaks of a day when God no longer has to deal harshly with his people.

He speaks of a day when the judgment for pursuing false joys is no longer held against those who have been made right with God through the grace of God.

He writes of a day when a new King of the people will have entered into their very midst and through his righteous rule will have taken away all their fears.

Zephaniah speaks of a day when people's greatest shame will be transformed into shouts of praise because every sin they ever committed against God, every issue in their past that they once thought separated them from God, will have been dealt with and remembered no more by God.

There will be a day, there will be a time, Zephaniah says, when men and women will "sing aloud" and "shout," where they will "be glad and rejoice" with all their hearts.

This true, authentic joy will well up not as a result of piling up enough money or achieving certain levels of success. No, this lasting joy will flow from the fact that God has found *his joy* in us, in you and in me!

Real joy, biblical joy, comes from knowing without fail that:

“The Lord your God is with you” and that *“he is mighty to save.”*
It comes from knowing that God himself delights in you and that *“he will rejoice over you”* — yes, little old, corrupted you, and He will do so *“with singing.”*²

You see, the real reason JOY is so essential to the celebration of Jesus’ birth is because in his arrival, in the entrance of that baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, God tells us that those Zephaniah-style *“joy days”* have come!

In Jesus’ arrival, the King has come into our midst, and our sins are now forgiven. Your greatest shame, no matter what it is, can now become a cause for praise! Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus his Son, God the Father, has forgiven and forgotten it all.

The truth is that so much of what we like to label as “life’s joys” are really just temporary pleasures, stuff that will come and go and makes us feel good only for a moment.

In *“The Story of Joy,”* Adam Potkay argues that most of us really live rather joyless lives. The reason is simple. Rather than focusing on the true joy found in Jesus, which is shared and experienced among a congregation of friends and family, we sell out for simple pleasures that are often solitary and momentary.³

But at Christmas, we celebrate the arrival of real joy.

Sure, you can ascribe joy to money or say it has something to do with success or even that it can come from noble things such as hugging your kids or your grandkids; building houses for the homeless; “adopting” and providing needy families gifts at Christmas. Those are great things to do, but they’re just pleasures.

² Zephaniah 3:17

³ Adam Potkay, *“The Story of Joy”*

Proclaiming Jesus' birth to the shepherds standing in the field, the angel of the Lord makes it clear that there's just **one symbol**, one sure **sign of joy**.

Listen again to what the angel said:

“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 a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”⁴

The beautiful thing is that, unlike everything else in this world, when your joy comes from Jesus, it's a joy that can never be taken away from you. Jesus describes the benefits of following him this way:

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that you may have life, and have that life abundantly!”⁵

Apart from Jesus, all the joys of life will someday be stolen, destroyed, or simply die off. The money will run out; the kids won't call; our illnesses and our diseases come back.

But when we are connected to Jesus, the life he gives us lasts forever.

The peace he gives us surpasses all our understanding and the gifts he offers — such as an ever-flowing fountain of forgiveness and grace — will never, ever, get old, and will never require a gift receipt.

Now, this isn't to say that money and possessions or the presents, parties and giving of gifts to one another is a *bad* thing. It's not. In fact, it's a beautiful thing.

But to celebrate Christmas right, we must remember that the gifts we give and receive, they are just *temporary* things.

⁴ Luke 2:10-12

⁵ John 10:10

We are to remember that the spending and the giving at this time of year are not themselves a means to our joy or even a sign of our joy.

No, instead these are things we get to do with hearts full of lasting joy because of the forgiving and saving work of Jesus.

As Christians, what makes us different isn't so much *what* we do, as if Christianity is simply about morality. It's who we do it for, that is where we find our true and ultimate joy.

A Christian community is one filled with men and women who work hard to provide, we are parents who dote on our children and grandchildren; we are people who relax in front of the fireplace and drink a glass of wine to unwind; and we are a people who pray, read scripture, and sing songs of praise.

A Christian community gives great gifts and throws great parties and sings favorite carols and hymns. But we do NOT do those things to bring glory to ourselves or to create our own joy.

No, we love, we work, we sing and we play to the glory of God and in so doing we share the joy that comes from Jesus. That's who we are.

Some may see it in money. Others might find it in fame or try to pursue it by piling up all kinds of possessions. But this Christmas:

May we be a people who sing because the real sign of hope, the real sign of peace, and the real sign of JOY arrives in the birth of the Christ child.

Let us join together and sing with Zephaniah, for our real joy, Jesus, is about to arrive into our very midst.

“Sing aloud, O Daughter Zion;
Shout aloud, O Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
O Daughter of Jerusalem!”⁶

⁶ Zephaniah 3:14

The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”⁷

Let us hear anew the angel of the Lord:

“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 a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”⁸

The real reason joy is so essential to the celebration of Jesus’ birth is because in his arrival, in the entrance of that baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, God tells us that our “*joy days*” have come!

Amen.

⁷ Zephaniah 3:17

⁸ Luke 2:10-12