

## Rejoice with All Your Heart

Fear is the enemy of progress. Fear is the enemy of accomplishment. Fear is the enemy of success. Because Fear is the enemy of faith. So fear is the enemy of joy. Fear is the enemy of rejoicing. But fear is so natural, isn't it? Fear is so ... human. Fear is so much a part of our world, our society, our existence. That, my friends, is a bad thing on this Sunday that used to go by the name "Gaudete Sunday". Some of you might remember that from the old hymnal. Gaudete (gau-debt- ay) Sunday – "Rejoice" Sunday. That's what it means.

But how can we rejoice? We can't rejoice when there is fear. And how can there not be fear? There has to be fear, doesn't there? The national debt is huge and growing. The unemployment is still way too high. All the rumors about what will happen with health care – rationing services, denying drugs, bankrupting the system. And what about our church? On Tuesday we vote on a big budget – what if we don't make it? And what if we don't grow? And what about the building? We've had hurdles already – what will be next? And – you get where I'm going with this? Fear is the enemy of joy.

But fear is foolish. Fear is irrational. I know that those who want to make you afraid sound so sane and logical – but they are missing something. Listen to what God says: **"<sup>14</sup> Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!"**

Rejoice with all your heart! Gaudete Sunday. Rejoice. And it's not because these original hearers had life so good. They were looking toward extinction as a nation for their sins. But he says "Rejoice". And he's not just saying to put on a front of joy or happiness, letting a smile cover a hurting heart – but "Rejoice with all your heart," God says to his people. "Rejoice with all your heart" God says to you! And you really can do that. You can wholeheartedly and completely and totally rejoice because of what that text said. Rejoice because your fear is gone. Rejoice because your strength is here.

First, rejoice because your fear is gone. Now, this sounds a little different from what Zephaniah's prophecy had been saying. Previous chapters are filled with wrath, with fire and brimstone, as God says things like – **"I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem... Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near."** The first two-thirds of this prophecy is filled with language like this. But then, out of the blue – **"Rejoice with all your heart."** Why? The next verse of our text tells us: **<sup>15</sup> The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.**

Rejoice because your fear is gone, because your punishment is gone. I'm sure you know the feeling of waiting in the principal's office when you're in trouble, or waiting "until your father gets home," or even having that conversation with someone we've wronged. Those are not times that lend themselves to rejoicing – but as we wait for our judge to come this Advent season, which is really what we are doing – waiting for God – as we wait for that all powerful one to come – God's Word tells us "Rejoice with all your heart." The punishment you should be fearing... is gone. So the fear is gone. Zephaniah writes, **"He has turned back your enemy."**

I think of that story in 2 Kings, where the people of Israel are under siege in Samaria by the Arameans, completely outnumbered and overpowered, just basically waiting to die. Then Elisha tells them that the next day there would be plenty of food and everything would be great – and they find that a little hard to believe, seeing as they were resorting to cannibalism because there was simply no other food. During the night – God scared away the enemy armies that had been camping around the city so violently that they left everything set up and left it all behind, all their food, wine, weapons, everything. The Israelites were still living in captivity, not realizing what had happened on the other side of those city walls until those four lepers finally noticed – there were no enemies in that camp any more – only their stuff, their food, their... everything. Have you ever been the people living inside the city, having locked yourselves away from what you feared outside, not realizing that the solution to the problem is already there – they just didn't realize it?

That's what fear does. Like I asked the children – Is there *really* anything to be afraid of? With God's promises – is there any way he could let you starve to death? Is there any way he could let something more powerful than Him attack you? Even in a dark alley, even with the mugger right there – is there anything to fear? What could that criminal take? Your money? What harm can that do? God has promised to provide. Your life? Jesus has defeated your death? Even in the most extreme situation – God tells us “Rejoice with all your heart.” Your fear is gone.

At least it should be. But let's be real. Do you sometimes live like it's still here? We cower to that mugger named fear. We don't live with full rejoicing of heart, letting things others say or obstacles others present make us think there is something to fear. Without a heart full of real rejoicing – meager offerings are given with wonder of if we'll make ends meet or maybe they aren't given at all because we think God certainly couldn't do it. We don't stand up and say what needs to be said because of fear of what the response might be. The simple truth is – all too often you and I let that fear creep in – sometimes even let it rule.

You know what that is? Sin. And then you use that sin to excuse the way you treat others, because “you've got to look out for yourself first,” right? You use that sin to excuse your bullying, trying to get your way. You pile one sin on another – and instead of living with hearts full of joy – you find them filled with jealousy and greed and stress and anger – because they are filled with fear. You might not want to admit it – but if you are not filled with joy, filled to overflowing – there is fear. And, back to where we started – fear is the enemy of love, fear is the enemy of joy, fear is the enemy of God.

So, yes – we should see that punishment. We should see that separation from God forever. But we don't. Rejoice with all your heart because, **“the LORD has taken away your punishment. He has turned back your enemy...NEVER AGAIN will you fear any harm.”**

Why? Because the LORD is with you. The king came. Jesus took away our punishment by suffering it for us. Think about that. It really is gone. He said it, **“IT IS FINISHED”**. Jesus turned back our enemy. Satan has to retreat before us because Jesus said so. Satan's power is not greater than the power on our side. Fear is gone because even death can't harm us – Jesus rose. He didn't stay the baby in the manger that we see all around this time of year - but he grew – he lived a perfect life in our place and put it on our record so that we have truly nothing to fear. Fear is dead to us. Jesus' resurrection proves that his record was good enough – like none of ours could be – but now his record is ours.

Rejoice with all your heart. Our text goes on and tells us to do just that, because not only has he removed the fear, but he has replaced it with something else. He didn't leave us a vacuum. He filled where there was once fear...with strength.

Rejoice with all your heart because your strength is here. Look at our text, at how sincerely and severely He is here for you. <sup>16</sup> **On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.** <sup>17</sup> **The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."**

For the second time in three verses – God's people are reminded that He, the LORD, is with us. The first time he's called the king. This time Zephaniah reminds us that “he is mighty to save” – literally – “mighty – he will save.” That's what he does. And not only did he save us – but now – washed clean in our baptism, rebuilt in love with His Word – look at how he feels about you. “He will take great delight in you...He will rejoice over you with singing.”

Have you ever been so excited about something you found yourself singing? That's a good day. That's a happy day, right? God is so excited about you, he's singing. Think of how completely forgiven you must be. Think of how completely perfect the record of Christ on yours is. God is excited about you, about me. That's how complete your salvation and transformation are.

You know, you look at all these little babies we've had around here lately, and you can't help but smile when you see them quietly sleeping, or looking up at you, or grabbing on to your finger. They just naturally bring joy. Because of what Jesus did the first time he came and because of what he will do when he comes back – that is how God looks at us. We naturally fill him with joy. God rejoices over us. Let me say that again. God rejoices over you. Now that is forgiveness. That is a removal of fear.

So, what does Zephaniah say? **“Do not let your hands hang limp.”** Fear keeps us from accomplishing things – but seeing ourselves as our coming King has made us – the fear is gone – our

hands can be strong to accomplish great things. So let's do it. Let's put away fear and live in the power God gives. There is plenty to do in this Plan of Ministry we'll be voting on Tuesday. There is plenty of money needed for the budget we're planning. So, my friends, "Do not let your hands hang limp." Do not fear. Instead, rejoice with all your heart. Rejoice because your fear is gone. Rejoice because your strength is here.

Rejoice, because the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.

Amen.