



WORSHIP AT HOME

*with UCC Westerly
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

August 23, 2020

Broadcast from our beautiful sanctuary!!!

- This abbreviated At Home Worship Resource is for your use at home this coming Sunday. Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a small summer bouquet!

- Settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin. Make your list of prayer concerns. Then sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you reach the Prayer Time in the service, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list. End with the Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you. *If you would like me to include your prayer requests in the service, kindly send them to me by email or text prior to 9:30am.*

- *Our service is broadcast on Facebook Live beginning at 845am. You can access the service through this church Facebook page, @UCC Westerly, or the church website www.uccwesterly.org where you can click on the Facebook symbol to be connected with the service. Please note that our Facebook Live broadcast is, unfortunately, subject to some tech issues that are beyond our control and, as a result, the broadcast sometimes ends prematurely. When this happens, we will do our best to begin again but we sometimes are unable to resolve the tech issues. Our deepest apologies for any time this happens. We're doing our best!* Please note that in the event the life service cannot be broadcast, it will be recorded in total and posted to Facebook in early afternoon.

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Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you

Gathering Music – Prelude on Evan

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CALL TO WORSHIP

[adapted from *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, ©2011; p. 22]

“Eternal Wisdom makes friends of God and prophets from among all peoples. But her gifts are so subtle she often goes unnoticed. She bestows great discernment and keen intelligence that you might judge clearly that which is good and that which is not. She bestows knowledge of nature that you might know the way to live in harmony with nature. She illumines her path and empowers you to enlighten others as well. ... Open your heart to Her and know you will speak the wisdom of God.”

OPENING SONG -- “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

[WORDS: Henry Van Dyke & MUSIC: Ludwig van Beethoven, Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.*

*Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!*

2. *All thy works with joy surround thee, earth and heaven reflect thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around thee, center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in thee.*
3. *Mortals, join the mighty chorus which the morning stars began;
Love divine is reigning o'er us, binding all within its span.
Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife;
Joyful music leads us sunward, in the triumph song of life.*

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION – *An Australian Aboriginal Prayer*

[adapted from *The Iona Prayerbook*, Peter Millar, ©1998, p. 104-5]

Rainbow God, you have created people of many different colors, and given us different cultures. But in you each has its source and fulfillment. In Jesus Christ you have made us one, breaking down the walls we make to protect ourselves. By your Holy Spirit you have joined us in one body, giving to each part its special gift. We pray that in the church and in the world we may experience, more and more, the love of your Holy Spirit, a love which honors and respects each one, which is sensitive to our hurts and hopes, which values the gifts we bring, and shares its own treasures with us. And to you, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and to ages of ages. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Morning Message

God Rejoices Over Us

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Rev. Ruth

A TIME OF PRAYER

Pastoral Prayers

Silent Prayers

The Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings*

*Doxology *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen."*

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CLOSING SONG – *"Forward Through the Ages"*

[WORDS: Frederick Lucian Hosmer & MUSIC: Arthur S. Sullivan, Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,
Move the faithful spirits, at the call divine;
Gifts in differing measure, hearts of one accord,
Manifold the service, one the sure reward.
Refrain: *Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,**

move the faithful spirits at the call divine.

2. *Wider grows the kingdom, reign of love and light;
for it we must labor, till our faith is sight.*

*Prophets have proclaimed it, martyrs testified,
Poets sung its glory, heroes for it died.*

Refrain

3. *Not alone we conquer, not alone we fall;
In each loss or triumph, lose or triumph all.
Bound by God's far purpose in one living whole,
Move we on together to the shining goal.*

Refrain

ANNOUNCEMENTS

A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION – [*The New Century Hymnal*, #875]

May you love God so much that you love nothing else too much;
May you fear God enough that you need fear nothing else at all. Amen.

PASSING OF THE PEACE

Music as the Service ends – *With Might and Majesty*

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### ***God Rejoices Over Us***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
*Facebook Live service on August 23, 2020*  
Text: Zephaniah 3:14-20

I wonder what it looks like when God rejoices over us? The first time I encountered this text from Zephaniah, which was relatively recently, that was the image that stuck out for me. God rejoicing! What does that even look like? Sound like? One thing's for sure – it's not an imagine of God as an old white man with long white hair and long white beard sitting on a golden throne looking cranky! This has never been my image of God but I know it is for some folks and I love that it is directly challenged by Zephaniah's beautiful text we read this morning. This is part of why I want us to consider this whole notion of God's rejoicing more intentionally today. Even more importantly, I also think we all need a little joy, a little hope right now and what better source for joy than our God?

This whole notion of needing a little joy right now recalls for me one of my favorite lines from a song in one of my favorite movies of all time – *Auntie Mame*. This 1958 movie starring Rosalind Russell was adapted from a novel published in 1955 and

which was in turn adapted into a play. It's a story about an eccentric aunt raising her young nephew who comes to her after his parents die unexpectedly. Mame's unconventional lifestyle is one based in wealth and the Jazz Age of the Roaring Twenties. When the crash happens, Mame is forced to find work after depleting her financial resources and even selling off the furniture of her lavish New York apartment. Mame finally gets a job from which she is soon fired just a few weeks before Christmas. When she returns home that night, she is determined to put on a happy face for her nephew Patrick and her faithful housekeeper and butler who have stayed on even though she can't pay them. She walks into the house and declares "we need a little Christmas" and then, true to musical tradition, they all burst into song while dragging out the Christmas decorations. You've probably heard this song when we are inundated with Christmas music on the radio which begins annually before Thanksgiving. It starts, "*Haul out the holly, Put up the tree before my spirit falls again, Fill up the stocking, I may be rushing things, but deck the halls again now, For we need a little Christmas, Right this very minute, Candles in the window, Carols at the spinet...*" And then it continues later, "*For I've grown a little leaner, Grown a little colder, Grown a little sadder, Grown a little older, And I need a little angel, Sitting on my shoulder, I need a little Christmas now.*" I am not suggesting we should jump immediately into Christmas in order to boost our spirits -- although the Christmas Bazaar brainstorming group is already thinking Christmas and they seem to be having fun. But I do love the need for joy in our lives this song expresses, especially in those moments when our spirits feel crushed and we've just had enough with things going wrong over and over again. Is this sounding familiar to anyone???

We all need some joy in our lives and joy has been in pretty short supply most of the time over the last months. Churches and schools are closed out of fears of the Coronavirus. Work lives are frustrating and fractured for those fortunate enough to have a job. We haven't been able to engage in so many of our favorite summertime activities, at least not in the ways we're accustomed to and it is getting very, very old. All of it. But, unfortunately, there is no real end in sight. Added to this is the overwhelming sense of loss as we think of 170,000 dead from a disease we didn't even know existed last year. So too the ongoing turmoil spinning off from the Black Lives Matter movement and its efforts in securing recognition of and justice for the relentless affects of racism they live with every day. It has been a bad year, indeed. So, dear ones, we do need some joy right about now – big time – which is why this text from Zephaniah touches me so deeply.

Who was Zephaniah? The book of Zephaniah is located almost at the end of our Old Testament in the Christian bible, and is considered to be one of what used to be referred to as "the minor prophets." The minor prophets, like Zephaniah, Zechariah, Micah, Amos, Haggai, and so on, are short books in the prophetic tradition. As prophetic books, they are critical of religious and political leadership of their times, filling the role of bringing God's insights into the mix of the ongoing life of God's people. Zechariah writes in the tradition of Isaiah, offering a message of judgment on the people for turning away from God tempered with a promise of restoration and salvation for the faithful remnant of God's people. Zephaniah is a call to renewal in a time of strife when the people, especially those in positions of leadership in the government and in religion,

were substituting their own wishes for God's instructions. Important to understand here is that Zephaniah's call to renewal is for the world in which we live rather than an otherworldly redemption at the end of time. Zephaniah was urging the people to work intentionally and diligently toward achieving God's vision of *shalom*, universal peace and wellbeing, for God's people in the here and now. It is for this reason that Zephaniah's message rings especially true for us right now in the midst of a political election cycle fraught with unease and extreme divisiveness.

So, back to my original question – what does it look like when God rejoices? Zephaniah in this text clearly describes God as rejoicing over us! What a wonderful image! But, before God rejoices, the people rejoice as they realize God has taken away the burden of God's judgment on them: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!" Then it continues, "The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more." Note how this phrase makes clear that God, and not a human, is the true leader of Israel. And God is fully in charge, taking disaster off the table for everyone. This is why the people are rejoicing! This is why they are singing! They are experiencing God fully and personally as God removes their guilt and restores them to the life God always envisioned for them, and for us today. God is right here with us in our midst, the text continues in verse 17. God will give you and me victory over all our challenges. *God will rejoice over you – over me, over all of us -- with gladness.* God will renew us with his unending love. In fact, the text says, God will be so happy that God will burst out in song! "God will rejoice over you with loud singing!"

Okay, so there's part of the answer to what it looks like, sounds like, when God rejoices. Singing, music is a big part of it. Worth noting is that the people have sung with joy to God first, and God responds with God's own song of joy over the people. Sort of like a divine performance of song in canon, where some voices sing and other voices sing in response. What are the people singing? Joyful songs of exuberance! The music of the spheres! A sound so glorious we can barely contain our own joy at hearing it! But, how do we do that? How do we hear God's response to our songs? Will we be able to recognize it, or will it slip by us unnoticed in the cacophony of our Covid grounded lives? That's the question isn't it? Does Zephaniah offer us any clues on what to listen for, watch for?

As a matter of fact, he does. God, Zephaniah says, will have removed disaster from our lives so that we will not be reproached for it. Everything that's gone wrong isn't your fault, God says, so I'll get it out of your way. Then, Zephaniah promises, God will deal with the oppressors who caused all the problems. They will not get away with what they have done to hurt other people and Creation. God will also save the disabled and the outcasts, making them the objects of praise and celebration. Then, Zephaniah explains, God will bring us all back home to lives restored, hope reawakened and new beginnings no one can deny. This is how we will know God is rejoicing over us! As these days of endless challenges and worries pile up on us, we can know that God is keeping count. God knows what we are going through and God stand ready, willing and able to step in and help us carry the weight! But, there is a catch to all this. There is something we need to do to secure God's rejoicing with us and over us. We need to invite God into

our lives. We need to surrender our will to God's even as we work every day at figuring out what God's will, God's desire, God's hope, is for us in the moment.

So, dear ones, the first step in God's rejoicing over us needs to come from us! God can't rejoice over us if God is not there in the first place. God cannot guide us, carry us, through dark days and scary moments if we do not invite God into them. God cannot be where we won't let him, because God will never force God's Self on you. Another way of thinking about this is to recognize the gift of freedom of thought and will that God gave you the moment you breathed in life. That very freedom – your original gift from God – is one you must surrender to God if God is to be a part of your life. God cannot restore you to life if you hold on to that life with your own white knuckle grasp saying to yourself, "Don't worry! I got this!" Do you? Really? I ask because I want you to realize you will never hear God rejoicing over you if you are shouting "Don't worry! I got this!" at the top of your lungs. You will literally drown God's rejoicing out with your own noise of self-proclaimed independence. You will literally push God away when you don't invite God in. And that, dear ones, is no cause for rejoicing – for you or God.

What does God's rejoicing over us look like – back to my original question once again. The thing is, you already know the answer. You've already seen God rejoicing. You just didn't recognize it for what it was. A spectacular sunset that takes your breath away – that's God rejoicing. The crashing of ocean waves on the rocks, or the kiss of the clouds hiding high mountaintops where God feels close enough to touch – that's God's rejoicing. The wail of a newborn baby and the whispered blessing of an elder loved one their way home to God – that is God's rejoicing. And, dear ones, that rejoicing of God is just for you. It's a precious gift indeed, and one you must claim with deep reverence, awe and intentionality. And a smile is good too. God loves smiles, especially yours. So, keep alert in your life this week for those moments of God's rejoicing! They're there, I promise! But you have to remember to pay attention! Amen.