

Joy Sunday and Blue Christmas (Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18)

The Advent 3 readings present an awkward tension.

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It's that time of the Advent season again: Gaudete (or "joy") Sunday. For some of us, it's the week to light the pink candle on the Advent wreath or to don those rose-colored vestments that come out [just one other time](#) each year. For all of us who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, it's the week the readings bend decisively toward joy.

From Zephaniah we hear that it's time to *sing, rejoice, exult!* Paul tells us to "rejoice in the Lord always." Isaiah would have us "draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation." And even in the more woe-oriented gospel text, where John the Baptist rails about the unquenchable fire, you can perhaps detect the joy in his message for those who are hungry, or coat-less, or victims of extortion.

And yet, here I find myself, by the light of the pink candle, finalizing the plans for the Blue Christmas service we'll offer at my church this week, amid these longest nights of the year. We've experienced more than our share of deaths in the parish community this year. Some among us are battling serious illness, and many are feeling despondent and fearful about the state of our nation and world.

So I'm glad we are taking this time to pause and pray honestly with the sorrow, fear, and lament that are our companions these days. Yet I feel an awkward tension between this and the week's joy theme, to say nothing of the cultural holly-jolly of the season more generally. Indeed, joy feels tough to access in this time, for many people I care about.

Last week I pulled out the Christmas lights from storage. I was determined to decorate my home this year—even amid all the funeral planning, even amid all the bloodshed and cruelty in the headlines. (My family's holiday decor is modest: a few strands of lights around the front windows. A fresh wreath for the door. A tree strung with just lights for now—ornaments to be added on Christmas Eve.) As I worked to untwist the light strands—every year I swear I'm going to store them more neatly than this—I was reminded of something Brene Brown says in *The Gifts of Imperfection*:

Twinkle lights are the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments. . . . A joyful life is not a floodlight of joy. That would eventually become unbearable. I believe a joyful life is made up of joyful moments gracefully strung together by trust, gratitude, inspiration, and faith.

I also thought about the fact that Paul wrote those words to the Phillipians—that bit about rejoicing in the Lord always—from a prison cell. This is no saccharine-sentimental sense of joy he is calling his readers to; it is more of a joy-in-the-trenches kind of thing. And John, long before he speaks of the wrath to come, gets his start in the biblical story as the one who “leaped for joy” in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's greeting.

With those twinkle lights in mind, I allow myself to relax a little, acknowledging that we too can hold the joy alongside the Blue Christmas feelings. Because true joy—biblical joy—does not sweep tensions under the rug. It tolerates doubt and sadness; fear and loss. It is a celebration of God's presence with us, even—especially—in the darkest of days. For even before I officiate this Blue Christmas service, I must already be thinking ahead to my Christmas sermon: the proclamation that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).