

Sermon: God Rejoices

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles P.C., Dec 12, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The hills are alive with the sound of music,
With songs they have sung for a thousand years,
The hills fill my heart with the sound of music,
My heart wants to sing every song it hears.

Would anyone like to guess where these words come from? The clue is right there in the lyric. It's from movie, 'The Sound of Music'.

'The Sound of Music' is a 1965 film adaptation from a staged musical bearing the same name. At its original theatrical release, the movie had enjoyed such a commercial success that it was the highest grossing film of all time, for five straight years.

The plot of the movie focuses on the coming of age of a young woman, Maria, with a fondness for singing, who was at that time only sixteen going on seventeen. Maria had initially wanted to become a nun. But her outgoing personality and unruly behaviour did not seem to jive well with the other nuns, so she was sent off by the Mother Abbess to a villa, to a widowed naval officer, Cpt George von Trapp, serving as a governess to his seven children. A budding romance with a bit of intrigue would ensue, and she would eventually marry the naval officer. The film was also set in the backdrop of Salzburg, Austria, during an incredibly tense time of the rise of Nazi Germany.

I think a big part of the success of the film was Maria's singing. She sang with such joy as if all the troubles of the world would sail away with songs. Not only did Maria sing, she taught the seven children under her care to sing too. Their singing, their songs became an important plot twist of how the entire family eventually escaped the clutches of the Nazis. Now I will admit that parts of the film are a bit dated, particularly with its portrayal of courtship, of relationship between a man and a woman. However,

Maria's singing seems to be timeless, as I rewatched a few clips of her songs, still able to move me, and bring smiles to my face.

It is with that in mind, I like to turn your attention to Prophet Zephaniah, particularly his invitation to the daughter of Zion, to sing aloud, to shout, to rejoice and exult with all her heart. The passage that we read earlier in Zephaniah 3:14-20, was set in the context of dying days of Judah. Zephaniah was one of the twelve minor prophets, a contemporary to Jeremiah. He also prophesied in the city of Jerusalem, in the last days of the southern kingdom. While Jeremiah was focusing on the sins of Judah, its leaders, officials, false prophets and unclean priests, the words of judgement that Zephaniah offered were much more sweeping in scale, and universal in its vision and application.

In only three short chapters, Judah was judged and found wanting. So were the Assyrians in the north, the Cushites in the south, the Philistines along the sea, the Moabites and Ammonites in the mountains. None could escape the cleansing fire of God Almighty on that coming day of the Lord. Yet, a remnant will be allowed to remain in Jerusalem, in the land of Zion. And in the final vision of Zephaniah, the prophet invites daughters of Zion and Jerusalem, to sing, to sing aloud. The reason given for such an occasion to sing, is that the Lord has taken away the judgement against Israel, God has turned away its enemies. And the true king of the nation, that is the Lord, or Yahweh in Hebrew, is in your midst.

Singing is an holistic activity that brings together one's body, mind and spirit. At a recent choir practice that I was able to attend, Heather, our music director, reminded the choir participants to draw breath deep from the core, from the centre of the body, not just from one's chest. We did some breathing exercises, using our hand to feel the rise and fall of one's core as we drew breath then exhaled. We also did some stretching and loosening of our neck, just so when that breath flows out, it would do so unimpeded.

Singing sets one's mind in the right place. It could actually help a person to overcome speech impediment. In most stuttering or stammering classes, singing has long been employed as a most useful tool. This may come as a surprise to some of you, but I did struggle with mild stuttering in

my younger years. Having to learn a completely new language (that is English) exasperated the problem. The Anglican boarding school that my parents sent me when my sister and I first immigrated to Canada had a choir, which I joined and enjoyed every minute of it.

Singing, even in a new language, offered an occasion, a safe place for me to be a full and equal participant, without having to worry about my own stuttering or my lack of English fluency. I always say that God has a great sense of humour. Never for once had I thought that one day I will be asked to preach, on a weekly basis. Sort of God using me in my weakest, to accomplish God's perfect will. But that another story all together, for a later day.

Coming back to singing, it is also a most natural response to joy. This is where and what Zephaniah had envisioned the young maidens of Jerusalem to do, will do, in response to what God shall be doing in the midst of the people of God. Sing with their hearts out, because the Lord, our saviour is in our midst, forgiving us, not counting our inequities against us, and restoring us to a rightful place. It is as if the breath, the spirit that the creator God had first breathed into us, is now being stirred, invited, and released. As that breath rushes out of us, it pours out in singing, in songs of praise, praising and giving thanks and glory to God.

What is even more amazing, Zephaniah follows that up with this incredible vision in verse 17,

*“The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.”* (Zephaniah 3:17)

It is that last part, God will exult over us with loud singing! Isn't that amazing? This is the only passage in the whole bible that envisions about God's singing. Have you ever imagine how God sings? What would God even sound like, in songs. I, for one, am dying to find out.

In this third Sunday of Advent, we are called to rejoice in what God has done for us, is doing in our midst. We are also reminded that God rejoices over us to the point of singing. However, to truly draw out that song, we cannot ignore the message of John the baptizer, as he called out those coming to him in the river Jordan, “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*” John’s message is that of repentance, a turning away from sinful living, and a turning towards a God-centred and God-honouring life. All in preparation for the one who is to come, that is Jesus the Christ

Despite his fiery rhetoric, John’s teaching to the gathered crowd was actually quite sensible, taking into account their individual situations in life. To the tax collectors, universally despised by the people, he did not tell them to quit working for the Romans. John advised them not to collect more than is due. To the soldiers, John told them not to abuse their power, to extort or to intimidate. To the ordinary folks, John simply told them to share what they have. The lesson highlighted here is that everyone can start exactly where they are, and live a more fruitful and God-centred life.

And there of course is where true joy is—in recognizing that God meets us where we are, begins to shape us, mold us and transform us. Until one day, most unexpectedly, we find ourselves to be the reason of why God rejoices. We find ourselves on the receiving end of that joy, as we are immersed in the songs of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.