

## Nonetheless

*A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli for "A Sermon for Every Sunday,"  
December 12, The Third Sunday of Advent.*

Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 3:7-18

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“Rejoice and exult with all your heart...The Lord has taken away the judgments against you...the Lord is in your midst...do not fear ...God will renew you in his love...God says I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth...I will bring you home...I will gather you...I will restore your fortunes before your eyes...” (from Zephaniah 3) The little-known prophet Zephaniah spoke these words to a people whose lives and homes had been destroyed by the conquering Assyrians; faithlessness and despair were running rampant when he spoke them. The invitation to “rejoice,” to not be afraid, and to believe that God would bring healing and restoration must have seemed ludicrous to those who first heard the prophet’s words. And the call to rejoice and not to fear may seem ludicrous to us, knowing all that happening in our world today. Zephaniah’s words may challenge us with their joyful, hopeful tone; but that’s what a prophet is called upon to do much of the time—“to declare an unimaginable hope in a time of unraveling,”<sup>i</sup> to speak a ludicrous word of love and care into the broken hearts that can’t imagine that joy will ever be possible again. This third Sunday is traditionally the day in Advent when we focus on joy. Theologian Karl Barth describes the biblical understanding of joy as a defiant “nonetheless”—that is to say, even in the midst of so much pain and suffering and confusion in the world, *nonetheless* we shall rejoice in the Lord always. How can we do that? As I pondered the question, I was reminded of Leonard Cohen’s song, “Hallelujah.” Cohen has said, “This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled...But there are moments when we can ... reconcile and embrace the whole mess, and that's what I mean by ‘Hallelujah.’”<sup>ii</sup>

I did my best, it wasn't much  
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch  
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you  
And even though it all went wrong  
I'll stand before the Lord of Song  
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah<sup>iii</sup>

The “hallelujah” chorus according to Cohen emerges from the confusion and brokenness of human life. And a “Hallelujah that emerges from brokenness is a holy Hallelujah; it is a genuine Hallelujah. That’s why the Book of Psalms is so full of Hallelujahs; those psalms are as much about sadness and loss as they are about hope and victory. They are holy.”<sup>iv</sup> And holy hallelujahs are hope-full and therefore joy-full *nonetheless*. Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*, is a holy hallelujah, a rejoicing in God in the midst of the struggle of the people Israel, even midst the radical disruption of Mary’s own life. The *Magnificat* is an extraordinary proclamation of our hope, a defiant joy in the face of all the injustice and struggle of life. It is a moment, to use Cohen’s words, when Mary was able to “reconcile and embrace the whole mess” by holding it in the light of God’s mercy, strength, and promise. Mary chose hope and joy—just as she chose to say “yes” to God’s astonishing decision that she should be the one to bear the Christ child.

We all have the God-given ability to CHOOSE. Human choices are, to put it mildly, a mixed bag. Human choices lead to brokenness of all kinds—physical, mental, spiritual, societal and systemic. But human choices have also led to beauty and to greater wholeness for persons and communities and to amazing and awe-inspiring acts of self-giving and simplicity and love. It has always been so. And the world will continue to be a place in which we experience extraordinary gentleness, beauty, and kindness AND devastating loss and pain.

“What then should we do?” We cry out with those who came to John in the wilderness... John’s response is quite simply: Do what you know is right. Love other people. Act with justice and mercy. Whatever you are doing, do it with love, do it with care, do it with a conscience. Whatever power you have, use it for the good of others. This word from the prophet John reminds us that our choices, our actions, make a difference not just for ourselves, but for others, no matter who we are or where we find ourselves.

John with all his power and passion knew that there was One coming who had more power still; who had the power to restore a broken humanity; who had the kind of love that could renew the souls of those like us who have grown weary of violence and hatred. John was the first one who pointed to Jesus and said: “there’s the messiah.” And this is what we still do. At this time of year, we Christians tell the story about the time that God looked at the world—a world so lost and broken by sin and violence and forgetfulness—and decided to send God’s own beloved child right into the middle of it to lead us back to life as it was always meant to be, to show us love at its most human and its most divine, to give us hope, and to guide us in the ways of peace. That child, Jesus, born of Mary, was just as vulnerable as any child in the world. Jesus never did anything more violent than turning the tables on those who preyed on the poor and vulnerable. He managed to live for 33 years before the violence of the world broke his body. But on the third day Jesus’ “shame was turned to praise and renown in all the earth...” (Zeph. 3)...his life was restored, he was renewed in God’s love, he was resurrected. And he came and spoke these words to his followers: “Do not fear...peace be with you...”

“Hallelujah...hallelujah...hallelujah... hallelujah.”

There are tragedies in the world and things that can't be undone. There are scars that remain from the hurts that we've inflicted and that have been inflicted on us. God knows that well, for God still bears the wounds inflicted on the One who came and loved us best. The promise is not that history will be changed; the promise is that the future can be. And we all can make choices that will make a difference... John said "I am not worthy." None of us are worthy. The point is not that we are worthy. The point is that we are loved. God's love, made manifest in Jesus, frees and strengthens us to choose mercy and love and peace and hope again and again—no matter what—and to defiantly claim the life we've been given as a gift. What then should we do in this hot mess of a world? Utter a holy and broken hallelujah and proclaim joy nonetheless.

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<sup>i</sup> Referenced at <http://biblische.blogspot.com/2006/12/preaching-third-sunday-of-advent-part-3.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Ashley Fetters, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/12/how-leonard-cohens-hallelujah-became-everybodys-hallelujah/265900/>

<sup>iii</sup> Leonard Cohen, "Hallelujah" lyrics can be found at: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/hallelujah.html>

<sup>iv</sup> The Very Rev. Sam Candler, [http://www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/music/advent\\_a\\_holy\\_and\\_a\\_broken\\_hal.php](http://www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/music/advent_a_holy_and_a_broken_hal.php)