

Prelude to Joy
First Reading: Philippians 4:4-7
Second Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Recently, while ironing ... (*Wait, did he say ironing?*) ... Yes, yes I did, and I'm really good at it, too :-). Anyway, I flipped on the TV, and Duke was playing UIW — the University of the Incarnate Word. That's a rather intimidating name for a school — the University of the Incarnate Word. Their sports teams are known as the Cardinals, which is not a stretch for a Catholic school, though it would be a bit more authentic if, instead of a bird on their uniform logo, they had a little man in a red cassock.

It was one of those early season games that are never in doubt. Little school gets exposure and the home team gets to test out the subs. One could read it as another David vs. Goliath story, except in this case, David's sling is broken and he forgot to bring any rocks. Anyway, since there was no drama in the game, the announcers were having to fill in a lot of gaps with human interest stories, and seeing as they were playing on Coach K Court in front of heavily fueled undergrads willing to camp out for days in Krzyzewskiville, the announcers spent a good percentage of their airtime paying obeisance to the legendary coach Mike Krzyzewski.

One announcer told of being given a tour of Krzyzewski's office and he was struck by the fact that the office wasn't adorned by any championship trophies. Rather, what was displayed prominently were 5 photos, one from each championship, with Coach K hugging one of his players. Then, turning his words into syrup, the announcer went on and on about how this exemplified the true character of the coach and his love for his players. In that moment, $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the viewing audience was getting all googly-eyed — "Awwww ... what a sweet man." This percentage is skewed because, obviously, Tar Heel fans were not even watching the game.

Certainly, the exultation of coach and players embracing at the summit of achievement is poignant, and speaks to the truth that joy is best when shared with those you love, but it crossed my mind that the player/coach embrace is just one facet of the complex dynamics that make up human relationships and shared endeavors.

It struck me that Mike Krzyzewski went to West Point, a military academy where discipline and tough love tend to eclipse feelings and emotions. Sweet is rarely descriptive of life at West Point. In addition, perhaps Coach K's most influential mentor was none other than Bobby

Knight, the most active volcano on earth during his lifetime, as researched by vulcanologists from Hawaii. Chairs flying, spittle soaring, players recoiling, voice thundering, words berating. When Indiana played or even practiced, bears hid in the woods, and college presidents trembled under their desks. Sweet? Not so much. Hugs? As rare as unicorns.

So, the loving embrace amidst the championship confetti is poignant, but as with any relationship, the full story is a bit more complicated. Did you ever notice Krzyzewski's face when he was really angry. He looked like Popeye just before launching Bluto to the moon, his face all scrunched up into a fist. It's not a good look, and I think he would probably confess to getting the most irate at the players he loved the most.

Love is not immune to anger, and I have to believe that the God who loves us unconditionally is also the God whose face, when infuriated by those God loves (ie. us), could be compared to Krzyzewski's when his point guard misses a pass three times in a row. Why do I believe this? Because I've read the Bible. God is never shy about voicing God's vexation with us. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God rages — *“Ah, you who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood, who drag sin along as with cart ropes*

... Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight!"

Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord fulminates — *What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?*

Read the Bible, read the paper, or just look in the mirror and you cannot escape the fact that God's exasperation is legit. The psalmist laments — *"They flatter themselves in their own eyes that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated. The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit; they have ceased to act wisely and do good. They plot mischief while on their beds; they are set on a way that is not good; they do not reject evil."* It's not like God doesn't read the news or have the password to our darkest secrets and buried misdeeds. Folks, if the Lord takes us to court, we lose. I think the only legitimate religious billboard I've ever seen is the one with the solid black background and the spare one line of text typed in white Times New Roman font — **"Don't make me come down there!" — God.**

We can understand this, because we know from experience how easily we find ourselves excruciatingly incensed by those we love more than life itself. You know what I'm talking about. After the headache inducing

morning chaos of getting the kids out the door for school, you answer the phone to the weakest, most pitiful voice you can imagine, coming from the same mouth that just two hours ago was at 180 decibels, shouting at his sister for stepping on his *Magic: the Gathering* game cards. Yet, you're no easy mark for the little con artist. *Mom, I don't feel good. Can you come pick me up?* Your answer to the pitiful little boy on the other end of the line? — *"Not unless they've already called Hospice."*

We have at times found ourselves excruciatingly incensed by those we love more than life itself. Among the prophets called to relay the Lord's wrath to us, Zephaniah's was in places, the most brutal. Zephaniah served as a prophet during the 5th Century BCE reign of King Josiah in Judah. Josiah was a reformer, pledged to restoring his people's commitment to covenant faith. The discovery/composition of the book of Deuteronomy is all wrapped up in this effort. Unfortunately, the effort was largely futile, for Josiah was just two years removed from the disastrous fifty-year reign of Manasseh.

Manasseh was a dreadful king, reversing the reforms of his father, Hezekiah; reinstating the worship of foreign gods like Baal and Asherah;

killing the prophets of the Lord; welcoming the practice of foreign cults; and possibly even participating in the cult of Moloch, known for sacrificing young children. And Manasseh reigned over 50 years, so you know his influence on the culture would not be easily undone. Thus, it is easy to see the rationale behind Zephaniah's harsh words of impending judgment to the people of Judah — *"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth ... That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom..."* And a merry Christmas to you, Zephaniah. The prophet pulls no punches — *"I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord..."*

Zephaniah is piercing the long held illusion of the people. They hadn't felt much urgency to be faithful, because they saw God as the Divine Warrior who would fight their battles for them, culminating in the Day of Lord when God would crush all of Israel's enemies. So, Zephaniah turns to the imagery of the Divine Warrior, saying that because of their disobedience and faithlessness, the people of Judah had become the target of the Divine Warrior, and thus, the Day of the Lord was not a day to anticipate with hope — *"the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter."* The prophet Amos declares the

same warning — *“Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light” ... “Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.”*

For Zephaniah, is this one of those — *Wait ’til I tell your mother ... Wait ’til your father comes home* — moments? Would the face of God resemble Coach K’s angry face here?

So, how does the anger that marks over two thirds of Zephaniah, turn to such an expression of joy and exultation in chapter 3? Remember what I said about our own experience? We have at times found ourselves excruciatingly incensed by those we love more than life itself. In the Confession of 1967 we find these words — *“God’s love never changes. Against all who oppose the divine will, God expresses love in wrath. In the same love, God bore judgment and shameful death in Jesus Christ, to bring all people to repentance and new life.”*

How does the rage of chapter 2 become the joy of chapter 3? Love and mercy. The hymn composer said it this way — *“O love, that will not let me go.”* The prophet Hosea expresses it so poignantly — *“I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.”* —

But — *The more I called them, the more they went from me.*” — Even so —
“How can I give you up? ... “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal.” John’s Gospel expresses it this way —
God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Looking upon the ways of this world, looking upon our complicity in the brokenness of human relations, God’s anger is legitimate, and God’s wrath is real. Yet, God’s love is greater and stronger.

God is not content with the laundry list of our sins, but in Jesus Christ, it is revealed that God will not allow His anger to stall His work of restoration and reconciliation. Paul put it this way — *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God ... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.*”

Zephaniah didn’t know how this would come to pass, but he did see the potential — *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 as on a day of festival.

Zephaniah understood that the path between God's anger and God's joy would be a journey marked by pain and suffering, God's own pain and suffering. Zephaniah understood that the path between our brokenness and our wholeness would be marked by trial and failure, mercy and hard toil. He did not know the role that Christ would play in that journey, but he trusted that God would not abandon what God had made, even though the people of God could make God as mad as a coaching legend when his team can't hit a free throw. He trusted that there is healing after brokenness, exultation after trial, and that joy could break through our self-induced dread.

Jesus said that the wind blows where it will, which means preachers shouldn't predict when and where the Holy Spirit will move. Yet, I can say that the conditions will be opportune for this space to serve as a welcoming host for the Holy Spirit's visitation this evening during our Festival of Carols. I can say this because I know the people seated behind me, and I know the gifts they have been given to serve as a living instrument of the Spirit's

work. There will be rejoicing. There will be cause for celebration. And there may even be a hug or two as joy resounds. They will be grateful for the Spirit's visit and support, and smiles will shine on their faces ... but they will tell you, it wasn't all grins and giggles along the way to this night. At times the journey has been a slog. Occasionally, there may have even been a discouraging word, and sometimes, the skies were cloudy all day.

I get that. Decades ago, I performed a bit, a little song, a little dance, certainly not as well as I iron, but it was a small town and I could carry a tune, at least enough for a participation trophy. Anyway, one summer a group of alumni from the high school music program came together to put on a benefit show for the local YMCA, kind of like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland — *Hey, we can put on a show! Broadway tunes complete with costumes and choreography. Another opening, another show, from Philly to Boston to Baltimore ... to Mexico, Missouri, population 10,000?*

Anyway, there was great energy as we came together to pick out tunes and rehearse ... and rehearse ... and rehearse. Remember, we were mostly 18-22 years old ... you know, *Summer nights ... freedom ... romance ... cruisin' by Hardees*, but here we were night after night, hour after hour,

measure after measure — *Okay folks, let's go back to measure 13 ... Ugggh!* I'll never forget a friend turning to me and saying — “I now know how those guards felt at the witch's castle in *The Wizard of Oz*, *Oreo*, *OOOreo*,” — the drudgery of the slow march toward the show. We began entertaining ourselves with thoughts of how to inflict pain on the director along with that usual quota of insufferable, high maintenance drama queens and kings for whom every scene of life was played as a Shakespearean tragedy. *How far is it from the stage to the floor? Hmmm.*

No cruisin' on the Boulevard for us, because we were stuck back at measure 13!

Yet, opening night did arrive, which in a small town is also closing night, and all the anxieties, jealousies, trials, resentments, old wounds, and insecurities melted away as audience and cast found their joy in each other. What a release! What exultation! If you have ever played on a team, run a marathon, survived college physics, you know.

The prelude to joy is seldom all grins, giggles, and warm fuzzies, but there is mercy as harmony springs forth from life's mess. Good Friday still

precedes Easter Sunday. Yet, the mercy of the Lord burrows through the mess, and emerges as grace, granting you a joy you never thought possible.

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst ... do not let your hands grow weak ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

Joy's prelude can be painful, even punishing, but, you know ... in the end, even measure 13 sounds pretty good. Amen.