

Sunday, December 12, 2021 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church
Third Sunday of Advent

Bible Study – Malachi 3:14-20 & Luke 3:7-18
“The Joy of Home”

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes) In pairs or groups of three, have participants share a story of joy.

Zephaniah 3:14-20. Context. Zephaniah was an older contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk, and his lineage links him to one of Judah's most important reforming kings, Hezekiah (715-687 BC; under Hezekiah Jerusalem was spared from destruction by the Assyrians). Zephaniah flourished in Jerusalem in the early years of the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BC), who recaptured the lands both of the northern kingdom of Ephraim and of Judah which had been controlled by Assyria, and instituted sweeping religious reforms, more far-reaching even than Hezekiah's. Most of Zephaniah's 9 oracles proclaim the coming day of the Lord, a great and terrible day when God would bring down judgment against all who had broken the covenant and turned their backs on God. Zephaniah made it clear that this terrible judgment would fall both on Israel for having forsaken their covenant, and on all the other nations for their inhumanity, cruelty and injustice. The Day of the Lord would bring sweeping, total, and utter annihilation of the monuments of human pridefulness. Drawing on the image of temple worship, he proclaims that sinners would be offered up in sacrifice. This week's reading is the last oracle in the collection, where Zephaniah turns from judgment to promise, from terror to joy. The oracle concludes with a promise of restoration and return that was likely added by an editor in the period after the Babylonian Exile.

Luke 3:7-18. Context. The message of judgment preached by John the Baptist in this week's lesson is common with the other gospel writers: God is no respecter of persons, but only of deeds, the "fruits of repentance." What is different in Luke's version of John's preaching is the additional dialogue between John and the crowds: his message may be one of judgment, but when people show a genuine interest in repenting, in changing their ways, John gives them very practical advice. In general, John tells them to share their resources, their food and clothing, with the poor. And when tax collectors and soldiers, two groups in society particularly reviled for their injustices, ask his advice, he gives it! He's more concerned that they repent than that they be punished.

Read Malachi 3:14-20 & Luke 3:7-18

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn't make sense to you in the story?

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20 & Luke 3:7-18 again.

Some reflection questions – Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

- The hearers of Zephaniah’s message are invited to sing and rejoice. What is the cause of their singing and rejoicing? [see especially 3:15, 19-20] How can we have a deep sense of joy, even when circumstances seem gloomy?
- Who is responding to John’s message? Which group(s) would people be surprised to see responding to John’s message? How is John the Baptist’s message preparing the way for the Messiah? How might we be called to a similar ministry?
- In light of John’s message, how do you think he would answer the question, “How should we live?” How is this similar or dissimilar to how Jesus would answer the question?
- How is what we “do” related to what God has done and/or is doing?
- According to John the Baptist, how do we appropriately live out our baptism? [Change the way we live. Be part of a new community.]
- How does your baptism (and living a life of repentance) impact how you *live* life?
- What is God *doing* around us this Advent that would cause us to experience joy? What is God calling us to this Advent season that would bring others joy?

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Each person prays sharing their answer the following statements:

I ask God for....

I thank God for.....

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, pray the closing prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the group or read the following prayer in unison:

Almighty God, giver of every good gift and the provider of life, we continue waiting to hear again the good news of your birth. We long for a Messiah who will guide us during chaotic times and bring us joy that passes understanding. We long for a Messiah to bring righteousness and purification. Come, Lord Jesus. **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord’s Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.