



*God will dance
with shouts of joy for you*

Prophet Zephaniah

REJOICE!

Rejoice is translated from a Hebrew word that means to spin around or basically to dance. The prophet Zephaniah is drawing on the Jewish tradition of dance to express joy, festivity and celebration since the time of Moses which continues today. For example, the prophet Miriam leading women in dance after the nation was delivered from the Egyptians (Ex 15:20) and David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:14). Zephaniah's message of liberation and renewal is highlighted by God so overflowing with love for his people that God dances with joy.

IMAGES FOR GOD

Over the past two Sundays of Advent, the prophets Jeremiah and Baruch have given us images of God who fulfils promises to love and care for people; God who will fill in the empty valleys of our spiritual lives with mercy and flatten the mountains that block our relationship with God. A God who longs for us, delights in us.

The Scriptures are filled with images for God; some

drawn from nature, for example light, breath, a rock, clouds, fire an eagle ... Some are from daily life; a father, a mother, a gardener, a potter, a homemaker

In the now classic novel and film, *The Colour Purple*, the central figure is a poor uneducated black girl, Celie, living in rural Georgia. She starts writing letters to God as a way of pondering her abuse. Celie is asked to describe what her God looks like. 'He's big and old and greybearded and white. He wears white robes and goes barefooted' something like the white men who abuse her. She gradually frees herself from this image and is then open to the God of love, mercy and hope.

The most ancient image of Jesus used by the first Christians is in the Catacombs of San Callisto in Rome. At a time when Christianity was illegal and Christians were being tortured and killed, the catacomb image is not the Cross, it is Jesus as the Good Shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders. An image of a gentle, protective guide who seeks out the lost and lovingly carries them home.

What are your images for God?

A TIME OF JOY

One of the graces of Advent is to remind us that God treasures each one of us beyond our imaginings, with a love that does not depend on our worthiness. The prophets certainly spoke strongly about injustice and neglect of the poor and vulnerable. They also called passionately to people who had forgotten that they were God's people, to embrace life with joy, trusting in God's love and mercy and, as Zephaniah proclaims, God will dance with joy for them. That same message is for us today.

LISTENING PROPHETS

The following is a reflection adapted from Nahum Ward-Lev's *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets*.

At its heart, the prophetic witness was a way of listening, listening beyond the social norms of the day, listening to the word of the liberating God. The prophets urged people to listen to God's word because the discourse of the king, princes and wealthy landowners was too narrow and was limited to the interests of these elites. This conversation did not include the voices of suffering people. The prophets, in God's name, offered a much broader discourse, a conversation that listened to and addressed the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged.

The prophetic tradition challenges us to listen especially to the cries of those who suffer and to listen to the voice of alternative possibility in the voice of God.

The prophets call upon us to listen to both God's word as articulated by the prophets themselves and to God speaking through the world. God's speaking in the world takes the form not only of spoken words but as a Presence in the physical world. The divine word is the ever-flowing source of the creative power of creation, the word of this Living Presence of God includes the vitality and dynamism of all that is.

The Living Presence of God also speaks within our lives, wordlessly calling us out into life, encouraging us to grow beyond our current limitations. This Presence breathes into us desires and visions of whom we might become.

Listening to the word of God is opening to the often wordless speech of this Presence, allowing the transcendent to touch us, to inspire us, to beckon across boundaries, to take the next step in our lives. Listening well to our inner lives – to the thoughts, inclinations, images and emotions that arise within us – is an important practice along the liberation journey.

Listening to another person and listening to the Living Presence of God are of one piece. The Living Presence of God speaks to us through our encounters with other people as well as through events in the world, through Scripture, and through our personal inner life. We are called to listen, widely and deeply.

Listening also reveals unrecognised possibilities. The world is full of potential, possibilities that emerge out of the suffering, yearning, and dreaming of people worldwide. Courageous listening animates the liberation process in society.

An Invitation

God came to us because he wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story, and to help us to realise that we are not walking in circles but moving towards the house of peace and joy.

This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey.

The God of love who gave us life sent us his only Son to be with us at all times and in all places, so that we never feel lost in our struggles but always can trust that he walks with us

Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and let him - whose love is greater than our own hearts and minds can comprehend - be our companion.

Henri Nouwen
Gracias! A Latin American Journal