

*"The Lord, your God ... will rejoice over you with gladness."  
Zephaniah 3:17*

Is there a difference between happiness and joy? Walking through the Med-Surg area, the chaplain juggled that question. He had just left Betty whose test results had proven benign. Her reaction still echoed in his mind. Like someone waking from a bad dream, she had said, "I am almost *afraid* to be happy!" But John, just across the corridor, was beyond happiness. In the slow diminishment of a terminal illness, John had told the chaplain, "It seems strange, but I have never been so joyful. In the busyness of my life before this, I had never realized how much I was loved."

Coming to joy, even in the midst of challenge, is the perfection of the spiritual life. This week's readings offer a syllabus for that journey. We find two great biblical figures visited by angels. Mary welcomes her angel somewhere within the humble routine of her day. She seems almost to be expecting the visit, already to have prepared a place for the Surprise of God. Presented with astonishing news, she simply asks God's methods before bowing in graceful accord. Zechariah, on the other hand, receives his angel in the reserved sanctuary of the Temple. This angel disrupts the practiced rituals that are stabilizing Zechariah's faith. Zechariah is startled, skeptical – *afraid* to be happy.

During this week, as we listen to scripture's angels, may we hear their call to joyous freedom. May we delight in the prophet Zephaniah's image of God who, replete with divine joy, sings over us with gladness. Each day, we are visited by angels. Will they find in us the Advent-heart of Mary, open to the wonder of the Holy Spirit? Or will they find us petrified in practices and protocols born of fear? The core of all deep healing lies in this: can we help people find their joy? Can we find our own? The answer begins in the recognition that, despite any contradiction of circumstance, we are infinitely loved.