

Night music: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

by [Herbert O'Driscoll](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

As World War II was ending, my uncle was about to be discharged from the Royal Navy. He decided to enjoy an evening out, and bought a ticket to see a play in London. It was opening night of a new show. He told me that he was not quite sure what the show was about, but had heard that it was a musical—an American musical. He also said that he didn't really care what he was going to see. All he wanted was to celebrate the fact that he had lived through a war and would be going home soon.

The first thing he noticed when he entered the theater foyer was the brilliance of the lights. For six years he—and members of his generation—had had to get used to muted lighting, and sometimes to no lighting. Now, at least in this warm, welcoming and crowded space, the world was suddenly bright again. Another thing he noticed was how alive and excited everyone was, and to his surprise he realized that their festive mood was affecting him, and that he felt the same way.

But nothing prepared him for what happened when the curtain went up. The stage blazed with the light of a sunlit world stretching into infinite distances. The dancers and actors positively leaped onto the stage. The music was electrifying. The words, especially the very first words of the show, transformed every listener.

O what a beautiful morning!
O what a wonderful day!
I've got a wonderful feeling
Everything's going my way.

And now we know what my long-ago uncle and those other people were experiencing. *Oklahoma* burst into the dark world of Europe like a sudden blaze of sunshine, space, energy, hope and possibility. It came from a land not exhausted by war, a land still strong, with almost infinite resources. It sang a song of the future.

Uncannily the song of Zephaniah echoes that theater moment, exhorting us to “Rejoice! Exult! Sing aloud! Shout! The Lord has turned away your enemies . . . I will bring you home . . . says the Lord.”

The note of wild and joyous exuberance is echoed twice more in these readings. They are so clearly songs of joy that it is difficult to read them in the measured way we usually do in worship. Listen to Isaiah: “Surely God is my salvation! My strength! My might! My salvation! Sing aloud! Sing for joy!”

Before we drop in exhaustion from belting out these songs—for that is what they demand we do—let’s hear the usually serious and intense Paul as he writes to the community in Philippi. Something is very different here, very different from the usual Paul. He’s ending the happiest letter he ever wrote, at least of the letters we know. He is obviously experiencing great pleasure in greeting remembered friends. We can hear him bubbling over as he sends greetings to “Clement and the rest of my co-workers,” calling them nothing less than “my joy and crown.” But Paul is only getting started. Now he really gets turned on!

*Rejoice in the Lord always
And again I say rejoice!
The Lord is near . . .*

The ecstatic song continues, as if Paul cannot or does not want to stop.

Why are you and I offered this wonderful performance on this Advent Sunday? Because although it may be winter in the realm of nature, it is the threshold of springtime in the realm of the spirit and of our Christian hearts. We are not far from the fields and caves of Bethlehem. But before we come to them we need to know that every one of the above songs was sung almost in spite of the times. Like those wonderful opening lines of *Oklahoma*, these songs came from a generation that had known shadow and suffering. For Zephaniah, a country was emerging from a grim regime. For Isaiah, probably a war had just ended. Paul writes from a prison cell. Knowing these things, it is salutary to look once again at the extraordinary joy that bubbles forth from these three great spirits.

We will be singing the songs of this coming season, singing them in a time and in a world that the next generations may refer to as “shadowed and threatening.” “They were at war!” they will say with wonderment. “They were concerned about their

economy! They expected to be attacked at any time and in unpredictable ways! They were worried that their environment was collapsing! And in spite of all this they sang joyous songs about a child and about shepherds and angels and some people called Wise Ones, not to mention utterly impractical things like frankincense and myrrh! They must have been mad!”

They may talk about us in that far-off future, when our singing is remembered as long ago. But if they judge us to be mad they will be wrong—or perhaps they will be both right and wrong. They will be right because, if we are wise, we will risk some madness of joy in this troubled time. We will risk this for the same reason that Zephaniah, Isaiah and Paul were willing to risk a wild and joyous song when they could so easily have sung sadly in the shadows that surrounded their small islands of fragile personal joy. But the reason that it is not madness for us to risk singing our songs is that we believe what they believed—we are a people of God, a people of a God who can be trusted.

So—“Sing . . . shout . . . rejoice . . . exult!”