A mark of a disciple is a person with joy in their heart. Zephaniah is writing in the 7th c. B.C., a couple of decades before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. The warning signs were clear as their Jewish identity had been watered down due to the influence of foreign religions favoring pagan gods. It didn’t take a crystal ball to see that Israel was declining and Babylon was rising. For prophets, like Zephaniah, this was all too little and too late. They could see the overwhelming destruction on the horizon. They also had the faith to see that Jerusalem would one day rise from the ashes, that the Kingdom of God would shine justice on their world and that there would be salvation for their people. This is the context of Zephaniah’s proclamation, “Shout for joy, O Israel!” What he’s saying is, although we’re going to know suffering and defeat, our people will also one day experience the salvation of God in Jesus. What he’s saying is, even though the world can get dark, we’re defiantly joyful. St. Paul, when he was writing to the Philippians, knew that he was living on borrowed time and that his martyrdom was coming soon. He also knew the hardships and persecutions the Christians of Philippi were going to endure. It’s in this context that St. Paul proclaims, “Rejoice in the Lord always. He’s near. Have no anxiety.” What St. Paul is saying, no matter how dark the world can get, be defiantly joyful.

Even though the days are getting darker, our country continues to be divided, and we may be dealing with anxiety, stress, or grief we call to mind what the world was like during the time of Zephaniah, St. John the Baptist, and St. Paul. Even though we have worries and fears that sometimes bring us to tears, we listen to their invitation to be defiantly joyful in Christ who offers us meaning in this life and everlasting life in the resurrection. How do we find joy in a dark world? St. John the Baptist has some excellent recommendations. Here was a man who knew his time was short as it was unpopular to be a prophet. He ended up losing his life defending the sanctity of marriage. His primary ministry was what gave him his name “the Baptist”. By utilizing water for washing away sins, St. John the Baptist points to that common experience we all have that can keep us from being joyful. He encourages us to level the mountains in our lives that keep us from the future God wants for us. He encourages us fill in the valleys in our lives that keep us from being joyful people. He tells us that the key to happiness begins with choosing to make good and loving choices. We can choose to be loving or not, so choose to be loving. St. John the Baptist says, on the day of the Lord’s coming, the Lord will gather the wheat into His barn but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire. There are consequences for our actions and inactions. There are people who choose to be wheat and people have decided to be chaff. Be wheat. Don’t be chaff.

For Zephaniah, St. Paul and St. John the Baptist, being a joyful person isn’t determined by how dark it is, or by the news, or by any current event in our lives. They didn’t define their joy on what was happening outside in the world around them. Their joy came from within, from the grace of God. Their witness of life, during the times they lived, say one thing loud and clear, joy is a choice of the heart rooted in faith. As we approach Christmas, we’re invited to examine the wheat and chaff in our lives and do some threshing of our own. What are the relationships in our lives that need mending? What are the areas in our lives that need healing? Who are the people in our lives we need to reach out to? How is our relationship with the person in the mirror? If we ask whether we’ll have a joyful Christmas, the answer to this question is up to us. Joy is a gift from God. It’s also a choice?