

## Joy

On this third Sunday of Advent, we typically talk about joy. We heard a bit on that with our Advent candle wreath liturgy. So it seems odd to think back to last week, when we talked about John the Baptist being the messenger sent ahead of Jesus to prepare for His coming. He was a rough guy. Someone out on the fringes of society. Somewhat coarse. Today, we might picture him as an unkempt homeless bum. On this Sunday when we think about joy, we also look again at John the Baptist – because there’s good news he’s proclaiming – and finish out what Luke records about him where we left off last week. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 3:7-18. **Read Luke 3:7-18.**

Talk about being rough and coarse! I suspect to some in the crowd, John the Baptist’s opening statement to them was viewed as an insult. “John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?’” (Luke 3:7). Something had the people shook up, otherwise, they wouldn’t have come out to see what John was doing in the Jordan River in the first place.

People talk a lot these days about identities, and how they identify. A few years back I was in a training through Zoom, and they wanted to know how I identified – as though that’s really anyone’s business anyhow. So I told them, “Hi, I’m Rob Berryman, I’m a man, my wife, Kendra, and I have three daughters, I’m a Special Education teacher, and I’m also a part-time pastor at a United Methodist Church.” Well, it wasn’t the response they expected, or wanted; apparently, they just wanted to know my preferred pronouns – he/him/his.

## Identities

Identifying people with labels has always been problematic. In John the Baptist’s day, and in the days of the Old Testament prophets, if foreigners living in the land wanted to get ahead, they had to “identify” as Jews. They would go through a conversion process, which included a water baptism to publicly show their conversion – but they couldn’t trace their genealogy back to Jacob. And so, they were always regarded as second-class citizens in the land. Not fully Jews, but willing to live like Jews, and worship the same God as the Jews, and even willing to undergo the same rituals as the Jews.

John the Baptist truly followed a long line of Old Testament prophets in calling the Jewish people to repentance. He calls on them to be baptized in a baptism of repentance, insisting that his fellow Jews start over and receive the bath normally required only of foreigners. And the crowds came. He tells them,

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, (Luke 3:8-9).

See friends, they can't rely on what their faithful ancestors did. They can't rely on John's baptism of them in the waters of the Jordan River. If they are truly repentant, if they've truly changed their mind, and changed how they're living, then that should be obvious in how they behave. In other words, their actions will speak louder than their words. Just as the owner of an orchard expects the apple trees to bear fruit, the repentant people are expected to produce fruits of repentance.

### **What Should We Do?**

What John the Baptist says gets the crowd bent out of shape. They're fired up. It's been a long time since the Old Testament prophets told God's people they needed to repent. And so they ask this last prophet in a long line of Old Testament prophets a question. "What should we do then?" the crowd asked," (verse 10).

"John answered, 'Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same,'" (verse 11). This is active faith. It's a clear, visible demonstration of faith at work. He tells them to share what they have, with those who are less fortunate.

And of course, we see that the crowd has various groups within it which repeat this question. "Even tax collectors came to be baptized. 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?'" (verse 12). Tax collectors in John's day were notorious for their greed and dishonesty. They were shunned by most normal people. They represented a foreign occupying power, and also stole from their own people. They kept the difference between what Rome actually required, and what they took from their neighbors. The bottom line is that they ran a pretty good gig and had little to no conscience in doing it.

But these fellows had a real change of heart. "What should we do?" And John the Baptist tells them. "Don't collect any more than you are required to," (verse 13). Then we hear about the next group that comes along. "Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?'" (verse 14a). When we think of soldiers, we think of people who are selflessly willing to lay down their lives to protect their country.

### **Christian Perfection**

Sometimes I wonder if some of the unnamed people in this Gospel lesson had the impression that the repentance John the Baptist was talking about was for everyone else, except them. Maybe some in the crowd were just there to gawk and see

what all the commotion was about. We sometimes get that way. “This applies to everyone else, except me – I’m already right with God,” right? Sometimes we catch ourselves saying that.

But that should never be the case for a real-life follower of Jesus Christ. We must always be striving for what John Wesley the founder of Methodism, called “Christian perfection.” In most cases that doesn’t happen in this life. If you read Wesley’s works on sanctification, it’s an ongoing process that doesn’t end until perhaps moments before we pass from this life into the next, if we’ve lived faithfully and followed the leading of the Holy Spirit on our lives.

These soldiers that approached John the Baptist were Jewish men in the service of the local ruler – who governs at the pleasure of Caesar in Rome. They are required to enforce the will of the occupation forces within their own homeland. Can you imagine what the ordinary people thought of the military men of their day? Patriotic Jews would have regarded them as traitors. They weren’t heroes to celebrate on Veteran’s Day, they were looked down on by the good people in society. In other words, the soldiers were like the tax collectors. They were marginalized, on the fringes of society.

### **Waiting Expectantly**

So John tells them, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay,” (verse 14b). Apparently if a soldier in the service of Rome lied about someone, they could throw them in prison and take anything of theirs they wanted. So, John’s directions to them were in the same vein as what he told the ordinary people, and the tax collectors. Share with others from their surplus and just be honest. He doesn’t give them a religious “honey-do” list.

We don’t hear him say, “Fast and go to the temple and offer sacrifices,” or “Come live out here in the desert with me.” He’s making the point that they can bear the fruit of repentance in their common, ordinary daily lives. That’s a point that we would do well to note this morning. We can bear the fruit of our faith journey with Jesus Christ in our ordinary daily lives and activities. The people in the crowd that day seem to have wanted to genuinely turn their lives around and live better as followers of Almighty God.

Luke records, “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah,” (verse 15). They’ve been waiting and watching. All the signs of His coming were there. The Church today can get fixated on the End Times. We’ve been waiting and watching. So many of the signs of His Second Coming are here.

Sometimes it becomes detrimental to our mission, to draw people who don’t yet know Jesus closer to Him, by doing the things which only the Church can do – loving the least, the lost, and caring for orphans, widows, the sick and imprisoned, clothing

the naked, feeding the hungry, and giving cool water to those who thirst. On Tuesday, after celebrating our sister Marcia's life, you'll have the opportunity to do that for her family, New Hope. I know you'll express the unconditional love of God through your acts of mercy and kindness – by preparing and serving a meal to her family.

## **Presence**

John laid the people's question to rest. He makes it crystal-clear that he is not the Messiah. He tells the crowd that day,

I baptize you with water. But One who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of Whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire, (verses 16-17).

It's ironic that John the Baptist, a cousin to Jesus Christ, a holy man who calls people to repentance, and who ultimately baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River, feels unworthy to untie Jesus' sandals. You would think, of all the people who have ever lived, cousin John would have not had any qualms about untying a shoe. But when it's on the foot of Jesus Christ, he does!

Our role, as faithful followers of Jesus, is not one marked by an assumption of privilege and an expectation of great and preferential treatment because of belonging to Christ, although we certainly receive that in the heavenly realms, to be sure. Rather, our role is to have a posture of humility. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must recognize that the One who shed His blood and laid down His own life to purchase ours is so high above us that despite our restoration and redemption by His nail-pierced hands, we remain unworthy of unstrapping His sandals. We are not worthy of Him. We've done nothing to earn His favor.

Even our greatest works can't pass muster in comparison to all the grief we've caused Him through intentional and unintentional sins we've committed. We aren't worthy of being in His presence. And yet, here we are! We're able to approach Him only because of His unmerited, undeserved grace poured out to us and for us. And that's good news today, friends! "And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them," (verse 18), Luke writes. Until the day comes for us to see Jesus Christ face-to-face, we continue – in whatever capacity in which we find ourselves – to spread the Good News!

**Prayer:** God of hope, You call us home from the exile of selfish oppression to the freedom of justice, the balm of healing, and the joy of sharing. Make us strong to join You in Your holy work, as friends of strangers and victims, companions of those whom others shun, and as the happiness of those whose hearts are broken. We make our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.