

A Joyful Wonder

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

3rd Sunday of Advent - December 12, 2021

Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

SCRIPTURE READING Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL READING Luke 3:7-18

Luke tells us that John's words are good news. Where in John's message do you hear good news? John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. 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 granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Six-year-old Serena got to light the Advent candle last week at her church. She wanted to light the pink one. They gently told her, no, pink is the candle of joy. That's for next week. She was confused. "Don't they want us to have joy every Sunday?"

Today is the Sunday of joy. But John's message sounds more threatening than joyful. Vipers and wrath and axes and burning with unquenchable fire. Maybe we misunderstand joy? I think of the words of the NT writer James, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." Really? Joyful trials? (Ja 1:2). Yes.

Paul, writing to the Philippians, encourages them to rejoice again and again: does it surprise you that he was writing from a prison cell? Last week we said repentance - re-penitence - is feeling sorry all over again, in a way that leads to amendment of life. Maybe re-joy-cing means feeling joy all over again, too. It's less about bubbling over with happiness and more about being thoughtful, hopeful. Happiness is about passing pleasure, but often ignores long term reality. Joy means living with eyes wide open in the midst of threat or danger. As Wendell Berry said, "Be joyful - though you have considered all the facts." We are living in the tension of opposites.

I love the Irish poet whose name I can't pronounce, who writes for the radio show, *On Being*. Recently he wrote this. "There was a Polish rabbi in the 19th century, Rabbi Simcha Bunim, who urged his followers to write *The world was created for me* on one piece of paper and keep it in their pocket. He suggested they should place a different piece of paper in the opposite pocket, with *I am but dust and ashes* written on it. This, he proposed, is a necessary tension. Sometimes I think of what else I could write on pieces of paper, things to remind me of the human condition: *I am capable of kindness* on one piece of paper and *I am capable of cruelty* on another... *Carry my joy on my left / Carry my pain on my right*... [Lutherans would say, *I am a saint/I am a sinner*.] This is not about finding a balance, but rather knowing how to hold ourselves in tension. We need both, held tight. One in each pocket."¹

What do you carry in opposite pockets? While you think about it, I'd like to teach you a song, then have a moment of silence. This is a song taught to me by my friend Carolyn who lit the candle of joy with her daughter Jessica in Germany today.

Be still and know that day and night, be still and know that dark and light are one holy circle.
Be still and know... joy and pain, loss and gain; sea and star, sun and flower are one holy circle.

I think John was offering the tension we need to understand our own lives and the confusing mixture of feelings they hold. Yes, his proclamation may sound like bad news, but it's not. Why not? Because change is possible. A project manager I know of likes to tell his team that bad news *early* is not necessarily bad news. That's because there's still time to take corrective action and avoid the potentially bad outcome. However, bad news *late* is always bad news ... because then there's nothing that can be done to amend things or avoid the negative outcome.² That John is calling for change and transformation means there is still time for that to happen. If we give up,

¹ Pádraig Ó Tuama, The Pause, *On Being Project*, Nov. 27, 2021.

² I got this insight from another pastor friend, Trudy Cretsinger, and her project manager husband.

give in, run away, or hide our heads in the sand, we lose that tension. *Sorrow for our failures, joy in God's mercy are one holy circle.*

It's like that doctor thing. Yes, you're sick. *And* there's a cure. Yes, there's still a pandemic going on. *And* there's a vaccine, there are ways to mitigate the suffering. Or the climate change thing. Yes, the earth is warming - *and* we still have options (at least for a little while. If we pay attention). It's not a punishment or threat, it's a wake up call! *Be aware, alive, attentive, alert..* Advent is, above all else, a call to consciousness.

In the same way, John's words about chopping down trees and burning chaff are not threats, they're constructive observations. I met a pastor whose home country is Tanzania. His people are farmers, who farm not with tractor and combine, but by hand with hoe and scythe. They winnow with winnowing forks, as people in Jesus' time did. And when the precious grain is separated, as a matter of course, they burn the chaff, the inedible parts of the harvest: fires kill the insects that might infest the grain, and the ash returns to the earth, and amends the soil.

Advent holds the tension of the already and the not yet, like the haunting words of our special music: "I wonder as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the savior did come for to die/for poor or'n'ery people like you and like I." In one pocket: *I'm nothing special.* In the other: *God came to earth for me.* The cross is there already in this song, and the crucifixion implicit in the Christmas story. Birth and death, joy and pain are one holy circle: a joyful wonder that doesn't deny the sadness that besets us. In darkness we grow more sensitive to the light; in trouble, we come to know the true meaning of joy. In John's words of warning we hear good news. I'd like to leave you with a poem called Pruning. After I read it, we'll take another moment of silence to stop and think about how this poem might be encouraging you.

Pruning

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. —Luke 3.9

Abandon your cruel cartoons.
God is not coming at you with an ax.
What's unfruitful in your life?
What gets in the way?
God (hallelujah!) removes it.

What do you do again & again
that doesn't help,
doesn't deepen life?
God (thank you Jesus!) gives you
permission to cut it out.

God is not a punitive bully
looking for firewood.
God is a gentle gardener,
looking for sweet fruit.

Let her lop off the dead branches,
uproot the nasty weeds,
clear the brush,
clean up the garden for you.

Sit by the fire.
Enjoy the warmth of your freedom.³

Prayers -

Merciful God, we thank you for this day - for the new snow which can be beautiful and dangerous at the same time; for this dark season, where we learn to slow down and wonder at the light. Thank you for the tension of holding joy in spite of sorrow.

We pray for all people are places burdened by covid-19 in its new variants as well as its old ones; we give thanks for dedicated health care workers and scientists producing vaccines. Our hearts go out to communities through Kentucky and elsewhere that were devastated by unseasonal tornadoes; and we give thanks for neighbors far and near already reaching out to help them.

Though we know that our world can be a dangerous place, we take joy that you are with us in the past, present, and future. We thank you for our new friends at Gage East and other partners in ministry in Rochester. May we learn from our differences to love better.

Guide and protect all who travel; bring them safely to loved ones, and safely home again. We pray for the many whose holiday joy is tinted with mourning for lost loved ones. Remember us in your kin-dom⁴ and teach us to pray,

Our Father and Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kin-dom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Let us not be led into temptation but deliver us from evil, for the kin-dom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen

³ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, www.unfoldinglight.net, December 6, 2021.

⁴ Resisting hierarchy, patriarchy, and monarchy, we follow many other Christians in praying for the reign of God where all are kin to one another.