

**“Welcome or Not”**  
**(A Dramatic Sermon)**  
**Luke 3:7-18**  
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**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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Well, I have to confess that I don't feel very welcome here today. I have heard so many good things about this church, how warm and inviting you are, but I don't feel very welcome, I just don't feel like I fit in here, I don't seem to belong, especially on this day when you are talking about and singing about joy.

Zephaniah belongs with his happy-clappy words about Jerusalem being restored, the lame being saved and the outcast being gathered. What kind of prophet is he with all this talk of rejoicing? I'll bet he never ate any locusts and wild honey! The Apostle Paul belongs with his calling to rejoice in the Lord always, words he writes from a prison cell. What kind of evangelist is he? A little crazy, I think. Even this Rutter guy seems to belong with all this happy music with brass. Gloria indeed! But me – I don't seem to belong.

I'm like the Grinch with whom I seem to have a certain affinity these days... only I'm worse. He takes away your Christmas presents, then gives them back. I take away your naive perspective on joy, on the baby Jesus, indeed on this whole season, and I don't give it back!

In your reading from Luke, I come on strong right from the very beginning, calling people a brood of vipers – that's venomous snakes for the unaware, not very popular creatures. So much for name calling being uncivil. I could have a future on Twitter! Then, I tell these viper-like people to bear fruit worthy of repentance, to live uprightly, because if they don't, they will be cut down like a tree by a mighty ax and then thrown into the fire. There's a happy thought for you!

I even insist that Jesus will come after me with a similar message, clearing the threshing floor with his winnowing fork and burning the chaff, the worthless growth around the wheat, with unquenchable fire. It just doesn't sound very joyful, does it? It just doesn't sound very

Christmassy. Luke goes on to say, “So, with many other exhortations, he (being me, John the Baptist) proclaimed the good news to the people.” Good news, really, good news? I know what you’re thinking.

(singing) You’re a mean one, John the Baptist  
You really are a killjoy,  
You’re as cuddly as a locust, you’re as charming as a copperhead,  
John the Baptist,  
You really don’t belong here, so go back to the desert from  
whence you came!

I get it, really, I do, I just don’t seem to belong.

And yet, I am his cousin, I’m family. You remember the story about the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumping when Mary told her she was pregnant with Jesus. Well, that baby was me! And I am the forerunner that both Isaiah and Luke say comes to prepare the way for this Jesus who is born. Are you saying I can’t even come to the birthday party? But most of all, believe it or not, what I am about at the end of the day is joy, just not the garden variety kind of joy. What I am about is good news, just not the naïve, watered-down version of it.

People tend to gloss over the messy parts of this story, the difficult parts, the demanding parts. From the very beginning, from his birth, Jesus does not have an easy time of it. Mary has to travel when she is about to give birth, there is no place for the family to stay, even Jesus doesn’t seem to be welcome at his birth. So, he is born in a stable.

“Away in a manger...” your hymnwriter says, “The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes...” Give me a break! No crying? It all seems so serene, but it isn’t. He’s a real baby, he cries, I can assure you, and this rough beginning in a stable offers a sign of the kind of life he will live.

He does not have an easy time of it. He faces resistance all along the way. He heals and feeds many people, he offers hope to the poor and outcast, he lives his life among them, but he also makes many demands of people, calls them to forgive, to love their enemies, to share their wealth. And not everyone likes it, to say the least. That’s why his

way is the way to a cross and not just for him, but for all who would be his disciples. Talk about demanding!

But it's not about being demanding, it's about understanding what kind of life leads to true joy. You could accuse me of being demanding. I not only call people to bear fruit worthy of repentance, I tell people specifically what they should do, partly because they ask. I tell them that whoever has two coats should give one to someone who has none. Share what you have with others. I tell the tax collectors, who work for Rome, not to collect more than is owed. Don't take advantage of people. I tell the soldiers not to extort money. Don't use your power to coerce others and help yourself.

In short, just do the right thing, treat others as you would have them treat you. Is that really demanding, is that so unreasonable? The truth is it's the way to live, not some arbitrary path an unreasonable God requires as some test of loyalty. It's just the way that will bring you joy as you have the satisfaction of living right and helping others to experience the life God intends. Maybe I've spent too much time in the desert with locusts and snakes, but it seems pretty simple to me.

So, maybe you need someone like me at the party, someone who gets it, who understands what kind of joy this savior brings. It's not a superficial joy that ignores reality. It's a deep-down joy that transcends the circumstances of life. It's not a joy that can be held onto selfishly. It's a joy that must be shared with others, like your Toy Joy or the meal you share with men Christmas morning.... That's the kind of thing I have in mind. That's the kind of joy this child brings. Is there anything that brings you more joy than sharing with others? So, welcome or not, I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. I belong in this story.

Of course, even the Grinch's story ends on a happy note, with him returning the presents and the Whos singing a joyful song. Maybe that's where we ought to end today.

God is with us, God is for us!  
There is joy for Christ is born!  
God is with us, God is for us!  
There is joy for Christ is born!

Peace will come and so will justice  
Welcome all the poor and outcast  
Christ is born in lowly manger  
God dwells with us, no more a stranger.

God is with us, God is for us!  
There is joy for Christ is born!  
God is with us, God is for us!  
There is joy for Christ is born!

Love your neighbor and your enemy  
Serve each other and forgive  
Give to all in need of clothing  
Shelter, food and love unending.

God is with us, God is for us!  
There is joy for Christ is born!  
God is with us, God is for us!  
There is joy for Christ is born!