

**“Where Is the Joy?”**  
**Luke 3:7–18**  
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Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday as it is called in the Latin Mass, the Sunday of joy or rejoicing. In some traditions, a pink candle is lit, rather than a purple one, but there are other themes for the Sundays of Advent beyond the familiar hope-peace-joy-love sequence. So, having all purple candles, as we do, is fine. But no matter what color candle we light, joy is the theme for this day and the lectionary texts help us experience it... for the most part.

The prophet Zephaniah, writing in the sixth century BCE, during the reign of Josiah but probably before his religious reforms, calls the people of Judah to rejoice and exult in the passage we have read. After detailing the nation’s failures and shortcomings, he now speaks of a time when God will take away the judgments against them. God will renew them in love, deal with their oppressors, save the lame and gather the outcast. Their shame will give way to praise! There is cause for joy!

The Apostle Paul calls the church at Philippi to rejoice in all things. He tells them not to worry about anything because the Lord is near. This might sound like the superficial babbling of a quintessential Happy Christian, but Paul writes from a prison cell. He is not naïve. He has known suffering and has no guarantee of safety. In fact, he will die for his faith. But he exudes joy and encourages others to do the same.

All of this seems appropriate for Gaudete Sunday. But then, we have the reading from Luke which begins with John the Baptizer saying to the people who have come to hear him preach, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Imagine how you might respond if I were to begin a sermon like this! John goes on to call the people to repentance and make heavy demands of them. He does say that one more powerful than him is coming, one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. But then, he says this one will gather the wheat into his granary and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire!

Where is the joy in this? We know there is such a thing as tough love. Is there tough joy? The very last verse of our reading, which comes right after this reference to unquenchable fire, says, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news.” Really? Good news in all of this? Where is the good news? Where is the joy?

Well, one thing John does, whether we find joy in it or not, is tell the truth. It’s a bit like a benefit of apocalypticism we noted the First Sunday of Advent — calling things as they are, even if the picture is grim. We don’t know why the people come out to see John, what they expect. They are a diverse crowd with a mixture of tax collectors, soldiers and ordinary folk. But whatever they expect, there would be no benefit in denying the truth. If they are living in a way that is displeasing to God, they need to know. Getting to a better place, one that might be joyful at some point, begins with an honest assessment of where they are.

In his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Buechner says the Gospel is bad news before it is good news. “It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather, what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob (p. 7).” Buechner goes on to say that it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure but also bled for. There is good news, but the bad news comes first.

Perhaps this is what John is trying to say. His intent is to help, not demean. He calls people to repentance, to fruitful change. He even gives them practical advice. But if they are drowning in the waters of dysfunction, it serves no good purpose to pretend they are not. They need a life vest before they drown, but first they need to know they are drowning. They need to know change is needed in a desperate way.

So do we. Sometimes we need to let go of things that are destructive or cumbersome, like guilt and shame, addictions and obsessions, unrealistic hopes. Other times we need to take on things that enrich life and deepen faith, like spiritual disciplines and support groups, habits that stretch our minds and take care of our bodies. Most of us could benefit from simplifying our lives, examining our priorities, managing our anger. Making the change we need

may not be easy, and we may need help, but it begins with a recognition of the need.

But it may not be just our lives that are in need of change, the church may need to change too. If the church fails to address the needs of people and society, if the church is self-serving and obsessed with institutional needs, if the church fails to welcome all people as Christ would, we need to acknowledge this. The way forward may not be easy. It may be difficult to reach consensus on what to change much less how to change it. But if change is needed, the first step lies in realizing this.

And, of course, this same reality applies to our nation. It's difficult to take in all the divisiveness, hatred, distortion of reality and outright lies, along with our inability to come together to solve any problem that threatens us all — like COVID-19 or gun violence — and not realize that we have some problems. We can debate the causes and solutions, but we will never make any progress until we agree that we have problems, and that we will have to solve them together.

John's straightforward address may not seem very tactful, and it certainly isn't joyful, but the Gospel is bad news before it is good news. The first step toward joy involves recognizing our condition.

But this not the only thing John does — tell the difficult truth — he also offers advice for what the people can do. After he calls them a brood of vipers and urges repentance, they ask what they should do. It is a good sign. They are interested in change. So, John tells them that if they have two coats, they should share with those who have none. They should share food with the hungry. Tax collectors should collect no more than the amount prescribed. Soldiers should not use their power to extort money but be satisfied with their wages.

Everyone is given practical advice for how to make things right. Simply pointing out what is wrong is not helpful, and it takes no special gift. There are people who think they have the gift of telling us what is wrong with our lives. It takes more insight to point out what is right. In dog training, we have to correct undesired behavior consistently, but it is more effective to reward desired behavior. The same principle applies to parenting, though human children are more difficult to train...

But when there are problems, while the first step toward joy involves recognizing them, the second lies in finding a way forward, what we should do, not just what we shouldn't. This is what John gives the people who come to him, and while it is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach, there are themes in his counsel. It focuses not simply on private thoughts and emotions but on the way people treat others. It focuses not on formal religious habits — like how often the people pray — but on the way they live each day. That will lead to fulfillment and joy.

The message for us seems clear. Once we recognize our need, there is work to do, and while it may involve some personal reflection, it will eventually lead to the way we treat people in our everyday lives — at work and school, at home and in the community — that is, with kindness and compassion, with fairness and a concern for their wellbeing. And while all ministers love to see people attending church — you do still get brownie points — what matters more is how we live out our faith.

I have told some of you about an Argentinian preacher who was concerned that his congregation was getting carried away in worship and not doing much in their community. He was Pentecostal; so, he embraced emotion and the work of Spirit. He just thought things had gotten out of balance. So, one Sunday he told his church, "For every hallelujah we proclaim in worship, there should be one good deed." He said he still heard plenty of hallelujahs, but there were more good deeds.

That's how things ought to be. Expressions of emotion are wonderful, but genuine joy in a Christian sense isn't just about how we feel, it's about what we do to make the world better. The word "joy" is not mentioned in our text, but if we want to know joy, this is how we get there — by doing the right thing. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, the time is always right to do what is right.

John may not exude joy, but he helps us experience it by telling the truth about our condition and offering guidance for how to improve it. There is one other thing he does that helps — he points to Jesus, the one more powerful who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

He is not talking about a baptism in water. John already does this, and we have no record of Jesus baptizing anyone. It is a metaphor for what Jesus

will do in empowering people through the indwelling work of Spirit. He will strengthen us in our inner being, and he will burn away what is undesirable so as to call out what is good. That's what the unquenchable fire accomplishes, not the destruction of life. Jesus will not only call us to do and be more; he will help us to fulfill our calling.

Herein lies the "good news" Luke references. Herein lies the path to joy. It requires a complete reorientation of life from self-interest to self-giving, but only with the empowerment of Spirit can we do that.

That's what John says Jesus brings. That's why we celebrate this one birth in a couple weeks. Many babies have been born, three within our church family in the past week or so, and every one of them is a cause for joy, every life is precious! So, why do billions celebrate one birth, cherish one life above all others? Because of who he is and what he brings, because of the joy he makes possible by transforming us so that we can transform the world — so that hungry people can be fed; sick people can receive care; homes, schools and hospitals can be built; refugees can be welcomed; rejected people can be accepted and loved.

The first time Dana and I went to Williamsburg, Virginia with her parents, we had a wonderful time, but her father and I became a little weary not of the historic area but of the extra trips to shopping outlets. So, I said, playfully at first, "Are we having fun yet?" Everyone laughed, and if I had left it at that, or simply repeated it a time or two, rather than twenty times, everything might have been fine, but the excessive repetition of, "Are we having fun yet?" got old.

A man in another church asked a similar question too often. "Are we feeling any joy?" he would say, "Where's the joy?" Part of the problem was with the frequency of the question. Another part was with what he meant. He was talking about a feeling and in a very selfish way.

We all have things that make us feel happy, that's fine, it's just not joy. Joy comes through fulfilment of purpose, in service to others, empowered by the Spirit of Christ. Frederick Buechner once said that God calls us to the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, p. 95). If we're looking for joy, that's where we find it.