

Joy and Fire

Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I learned a new word this week: *Gaudete*.

Apparently, in some parts of the Christian tradition, the third Sunday of Advent is referred to as Gaudete Sunday.

Gaudete is the Latin word for “rejoice.” It is taken from one of this morning’s Scriptures that we *didn’t* read, Philippians 4:4-7.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!

There was a time, apparently, when the season of Advent was a penitential season similar to Lent. Gaudete Sunday was a liturgical break from penitence—a reminder that the coming of Christ was an occasion for joy and gladness.

Advent is not really seen as a penitential season any longer. Unless going to the mall counts as penance, which it does for me.

Christmas joy weaves its way throughout the season in the songs that we sing and in the texts that we hear. This is, in my view, entirely appropriate. Joy in Jesus’ first coming ought to saturate every season of the Christian calendar, including Advent.

But these two ideas—penitence and rejoicing—find their way into our texts each Advent season.

This morning, we’ve heard from two prophets: John the Baptist and Isaiah.

The prophets can be kind of frustrating. On the one hand, they offer some of Scripture’s most beautiful words of comfort.

They speak of the Righteous Branch who will usher in justice and righteousness. They promise a restoration of fortunes and point to the One who will gather up his people and rejoice over them with gladness.

They herald a coming day when human beings will draw water from the wells of salvation with joy. They proclaim the Advent of the Prince of Peace who comes to meet the hopes and fears of all the years.

They very often speak these words to people who are suffering in exile, far from home, seemingly abandoned by God, and without hope.

And yet on the other hand, they are a wild bunch who often have unpleasant words for their hearers. They talk about ominous scenes of judgment and woe. They warn of refining fires and an axe ready to fell an unfruitful tree.

They even speak harsh words of condemnation and blame. They rant and they rave, wild-eyed, to anyone who will listen, screaming, *repent!* Your sins are the root of your suffering. You should know better!

There could scarcely be a less welcome message in our cultural context.

It wasn't an appealing message for its first hearers either. The prophets were not a particularly esteemed lot. They were often ridiculed and ignored, at best. At worst, one of them was nailed to a cross.

Nobody likes being told to repent and we will often go to great lengths to silence voices that tell us to do so.

And yet, the people of Israel (and, later, the church) have insisted upon preserving the words of the prophets in their Scriptures.

The prophets offend us, at times. And this is probably as it should be. We need the prophets. We need their hope and comfort; we also need their call to repent.

Last week, I talked about two words: "righteousness" and "fear." Today I want to talk about two more that symbolize this double-edged message of the prophets.

"Joy" and "fire."

I'm going to start with "fire."

The word “fire” up three times in our gospel text this morning, and John the Baptist is nothing if not fiery.

One commentator cheerfully described him as, “John the curmudgeonly Baptist, the bearded killjoy of Christmas.”¹

John doesn’t know much about how to work a crowd. He begins our passage today by calling them a “brood of vipers,” warns them of the coming wrath of God, tells them that the axe is at the root of the tree and that they’d better start producing fruit, and ends with an image of One who is coming who will separate the wheat from the chaff.

For good measure, he tells them that they’d better not presume that their genetic and spiritual lineage as children of Abraham will win them any points. *God doesn’t put nearly as much stock in your pedigree as you do*, John says. *He can raise up children out of these stones!* Sobering words for any of us who are tempted to rely on our ancestry for our spiritual identity!

God has no grandchildren, Richard Rohr says, only children who choose for themselves. John would certainly agree, although he probably wouldn’t be as nice as Richard Rohr about it!

I don’t think John has read *How to Win Friends and Influence People!* He sounds more like one of those crazy street preachers than a reasonable lecturer of theology!

“With many other words,” Luke says, “John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”

Good news? Sounds more like terrifying news!

And yet, it seems—incredibly!—that great crowds streamed into the desert to get yelled at by John.

Debie Thomas wrote a great essay this week on a website called *Journey with Jesus*. It’s called “What Then Should We Do?” She ponders this question of what drew people out into the desert:

Why? Why are [the people] willing— no, eager—to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? What attracts them?

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2030>

The first clue lies in the question they ask John at the conclusion of his sermon. "What should we do?" That's not necessarily a question people ask when things are going well. It's the question we ask when we've come to the ends of ourselves. When the received wisdom has failed, when our cherished defenses are down, when our lives are splitting at the seams. It's what we ask when we're weary, bored, disillusioned, or desperate. "What should we do?"

So here's the challenge: is this a question we're asking during this Advent season? As we wait in the darkness, as we look forward with hope to the coming of the Messiah, are we engaging in the kind of robust self-reflection that leads to action? Or are we smug, complacent, and sluggish? Are we flocking, like the crowds in John's story, towards genuine repentance? Or are we turning away, offended that repentance has a place in the Christmas story?²

So, what *should* we do?

It's interesting to note what John actually says.

He tells the crowds to share their food and clothing with those in need.

He tells the tax collectors not to collect more than they are required to.

(Tax collectors were, of course, famous, for skimming off the top and lining their own pockets. This, in addition to being seen as collaborators with their Roman occupiers, was why they were so reviled by the people.)

He tells soldiers not to extort money and to stop accusing people falsely, to be content with their wages.

(Soldiers were pretty disposable, on the whole, and poorly paid. This led to various strategies to "supplement" their incomes).

So, on the whole:

- Share with those in need
- Be fair; don't cheat

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2030>

- Tell the truth
- Be content with what you have

This doesn't sound like terribly revolutionary counsel.

You might expect something a bit more dramatic from a wild prophet in the desert! Some heroic demonstrations of penitence, perhaps! Maybe a sizeable financial contribution to the temple. As Anabaptists, we might even have preferred if John would have commanded the soldier to lay down his sword!

But John tells people in essence, to pursue righteousness and justice in the ordinary, everyday domains of their lives.

God has called each of you to your station in life, he seems to be saying. So, do what you know to be righteous and true, right where God has placed you!

Share. Be fair. Tell the truth. Don't be greedy. Be content.

The axe is at the root of the tree and the fires are being stoked not because God's people are failing to be super-spiritual heroes of faith, but because they are failing to bear the fruit in the most basic daily ways.

So, that's the "fire." What about "joy?"

Is there any joy to be found this Sunday? Or is this all just obedience and duty?

If we read John the Baptist in isolation from other texts, it can be easy to come to the conclusion that salvation depends entirely on our own repentance and righteousness.

Then we're back to the fear that I talked about last Sunday.

We need words like Isaiah's to steer us back toward God and toward joy:

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With *joy* you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

I think that joy comes when we realize that ultimately our salvation does not depend on *our* strength and might, but God's.

Isaiah is just as harsh as John in some parts. Isaiah did not hold back in telling the people of Israel to turn away from injustice and idolatry. But he also knew that his people's only hope was in God's salvation, not their own.

The one who rebukes is also the one who saves. Our reading begins with Isaiah 12:2, but if the chapter begins with these words.

You will say in that day:
I will give thanks to you, O Lord,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

This is the deep hope of the Christian faith, and of the seasons of Advent and Christmas in particular. The God who judges is the God who draws near.

And I wonder if we might also come to see judgment itself as a source of joy. This isn't natural, I know. We fear judgment not simply because we fear punishment, but because we fear the truth.

Sometimes the truth is hard to hear, and we shrink from it. Sometimes it's not pleasant to look in the mirror, and so we avoid it.

But ultimately, we believe that God's judgement is a final telling of the truth.

Lauren Winner, professor at Duke Divinity School, puts it well:

This tension between the joy of [Isaiah]... and the judgment of the [John's] proclamation is, I think, theologically instructive. **It presses us to find joy in judgment, or at least to hold the two together.** Judgment, after all, is not finally about punishment or castigation. **To judge something is to see it as it is**—and God's judgment is the act by which God sees us as we are.

Is this good news? The answer depends on what you think you are, what you think God will see. On the days when I think I am horrible, the idea of being seen by God is dreadful... and terrifying. But Advent insists that eschatological joy belongs inseparably alongside eschatological judgment, and this implies that perhaps God doesn't see what is horrible about us...

The thread that holds [this] Sunday's joy together with judgment is, simply, hope—the age-old Christian hope that we can indeed be seen and that by the time we are seen we won't be horrible. To borrow John the Baptist's metaphor, **hope is the anticipation that when we finally face God's judgment—God's gaze, God's seeing us as we are—Jesus will have removed the chaff...** When God comes to see us as we are, what God will see is

wheat—and God’s seeing it will make it wheat at its finest. Thus, rejoice in the Lord always; the Lord is near; rejoice!³

Joy comes when we realize that being seen truly by God—being judged—is a source of hope.

Joy comes when we see that fire is not just for burning up that which is unfruitful, but also for purifying—like the refiners’ fire spoken of by another prophet, Malachi—and that fire, as at Pentecost, is the symbol of the Holy Spirit’s promise to guide us into all truth.

So, joy and fire do go together.

Debie Thomas puts it beautifully:

So where does joy come from? Maybe it comes from true repentance. From the great relief of laying our burdens down. Maybe joy comes when we hear a shockingly painful truth about ourselves—“You brood of vipers!”—and decide to listen rather than run.

The thing is, odd and crusty as John is, he understands something hard and flinty about joy. Joy is not sentiment. Joy is not happiness. Joy is not cheap. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," John tells the crowds who flock to him in the Judean wilderness. Bear fruit — bring it forth. But also, bear it—carry it, shoulder it, endure it. Your life is a golden field, ripe for sacred fire. Yes, the fire hurts, but the One who wields the flame is trustworthy. He knows you. He sees you. He loves you. And he will gather you with joy.⁴

I love those last few lines. *He knows you, sees you, loves you. And he will gather you with joy.*

A final word. We must remember that John the Baptist pointed beyond himself. He pointed to Jesus.

And Jesus, of course, would tell the truth about the world and about God.

³ https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-11/december-13-third-sunday-advent?fbclid=IwAR3v_xYD4UO69QuP4nfpQ-pNRt8Cymc-9sXP7zUPQWBim_70Lb4NkG_wrvE

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2030>

Jesus would walk into the fires of judgment on our behalf, for the joy set before him (Heb. 12:2).

This is our God. A God of mind- and faith-stretching paradoxes. A God who speaks both judgment and hope. A God who both lays the blame and takes the blame.

So my prayer for you on this Third Sunday of Advent is that you would be enabled to *Gaudete*—to rejoice!—in the God who comes.

But not because this God is a feel-good collection of Hallmark Christmas platitudes.

Rather, because this God loves you enough to judge you—to see you truly as you are, to purify you, to enable you to bear the ordinary, life-giving fruit of righteousness right where God has placed you.

He knows you. He sees you. He loves you. And he will gather you with joy.

Thanks be to God.

