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“Joy is Relational”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia
Season of Advent, Joy Sunday, December 12, 2021
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 12: 2-6 Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3: 7-18

Isaiah 12:2-6

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. 4 And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. 5 Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. 6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

7 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? 8 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. 9 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.”

10 And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 11 In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13 He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14 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.”

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 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. 17 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.”

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Sermon

What Then Should We Do?

While showing a family around the Christmas Tree lot on our church lawn,
we got to visiting about the significance of the four Sundays of Advent.
As we compared liturgical notes,
our conversation delved into the meaning of joy.
The daughter of the family asked me if I knew what joy stood for.
Before I could get a word out,
she said, *“Joy is spelled J O Y = Jesus and Others before Yourself.”*

Yes, indeed; there is much joy whenever we place Jesus and others before our self.
Joy is contingent on our relationship with the Holy.
Joy is relational.
When we place God and our neighbor before us,
when we think about others and the God who made us all in love,
we tap into that blessed gift of gladness we call joy.

What Then Should We Do?

Joy rises out of our faith in God.
Joy rises out of our connections with friends and family.
Joy rises out of our sacrifices we make when we place our neighbor before ourselves.
Too often we focus on our fallen nature, our frailty, our fallibility.
There is Good News, my friends.

Historian John Meacham spoke at the National Cathedral, saying,

“From the beaches of Normandy to the rending of the Iron Curtain, from Harriet Tubman to Alice Paul to John Lewis, we’re our best selves when we build bridges, not walls — when we act out of generosity, not greed — when we lend a hand, not when we point fingers.

In such moments America gets much right. And honesty compels us to admit that we also get much wrong. How could we not? A democracy is the sum of its parts, and we are the parts— the sinful, the selfish, and the self-satisfied.

I, for one, am all of those things. I am a sinner who falls short of the mark again and again and again — every hour of every day.

I know better.

I know better from the sacred scripture of my faith, the secular scripture of my country — and yet I fail. I'd be willing to wager you do, too.

But we endure, driven by the hope that we might one day prevail. For all of our manifold failings, as creatures of God, we are taught to remember — remember — that we, too, can overcome the darkness.”

What Then Should We Do?

It is to the whole people of God that John the Baptist came
to call us out into the wilderness, to repent and be baptized,
to rediscover the joy that comes from our relationship with Jesus Christ.
The coming of the Christ Child brings great joy.
Our joy isn't dependent on what is going on in our life or in the world.
Nor does our joy depend on the gifts we give away or find under a tree.
No earthly thing can ever give us complete joy.

Our joy comes from God, who loves you.
This same joy filled the hearts of the shepherds, the angels, the wise ones,
the angelic hosts, Mary and Joseph.
How about you and me as well?

What Then Should We Do?

One of our church's college students took a religion class.
A class requirement was to visit a church different from her own.
Afterward, without divulging the church name, the student posted,
*“All I heard there was hellfire and brimstone.
I missed the love we share at Decatur First Christian.”*

Nice to hear.
To be honest, there's plenty of hellfire and brimstone preaching in the Bible.
Enter John the Baptist.
He is a prophetic preacher of legend, clearing a way
in the wilderness of people's lives
for the anointed one of God.
John intrudes — not quietly, not gently, not saying,
“Ah, excuse me, pardon me, may I have a moment?”
No, John noisily intrudes on our Christmas cheer,
reminding us that Jesus comes to save and redeem,

One day a blessed soul repented to this pastor, saying,

*"Pastor, I am so ashamed of my sin
I am not worthy to go to church."*

With confidence borne of experience this pastor told our repentant friend,

*"Our elders are wounded healers,
our deacons practice servant leadership,
our choirs ring and will sing soon with a faith borne of love lost and found,
and the Prodigal Son is your pastor.*

Christ heard your confession, forgives you, and already forgot it.

Now come out of the wilderness, my friend, and come home."

Heaven help us

so we may be a healing home for the lost, the least, the broke & the broken.

Heaven help us

to carry out the mission one of our elders suggested be proclaimed
with a massive banner on the church lawn that says, *"We Buy Ugly Souls."*

Heaven help us

if we succumb to the temptation to be a shrine for the perfect.

Somehow, knowing you, knowing me, knowing Christ,

I'm not so worried about that one.

What Then Should We Do?

Interestingly, John does his preaching out in the wilderness.

He moves out and away from the mainstream of modern life.

John the Baptist is suggesting in his own way

that an encounter with Jesus Christ
will require taking a different path.

So John calls us out, too,

out into the wilderness.

He beckons us out of our familiar confines

into a wilderness world where sins are confessed,
lives water washed, and the way of God prepared.

And the crowds asked John, "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.”*

What Then Should We Do?

For some of us John may be calling us to physically move out,
to get up and go, to depart from normal routines and places
in search of a wilderness experience which will connect us with our true joy.

When John says, *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,”*
is he inviting you to revisit your vocation?
to clarify your call and purpose?
to experience the joy of rediscovery?

For some of us the wilderness we need to get to may be within us,
to reach a secret place or unmask a hidden face,
to find a silence to break or an offering to take.

When John says, *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,”*
is he calling to you to accept the joyous light of Christ,
to let it shine in the shadows and illuminate your spirit?

For some of us the wilderness is the wall of fear that has been built,
brick by brick by hopeless brick,
to divide and separate and distract the whole people of God.
We fear what we do not understand.
Rarely do we uncover true disagreement.
Usually we find misunderstanding.

When John says, *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,”*
he is calling us as a Christian Church to be a safe space and a sacred place
for the engagement and empowerment of disciples
from all walks of life,
to be a faith community that boldly breaks down social barriers that divide
in order to open lines of communication and commonality!

And what better place is there to prepare the way of the Lord
than the Lord’s Table,
where Jesus invites you and me to dine with Him.

The Gospel teaches that Christ welcomed sinners & broke bread with them.
He did then and he will do so again here this morning.

What Then Should We Do?

I cannot tell you how proud and delighted I am

to be a participant in a congregation that stands out as a beacon of light
simply because we accept and do not judge
those whom John and Jesus call to confession and baptism.
Here we embody and exude a joy that is relational.

Reminds me of a story called "The Christmas Scale"
when the Good News became personal, communal, relational.

*My mamma told me something when I was growing up
that has forever changed my life.
She played the piano in our little church ...for 37 years.
She tried to teach me the piano, but I wasn't very good.
She would teach me the names of the notes,
what a major key is, what a minor key is.
She tried to teach me musical theory, but I was just bored.*

*Then one day she told me that the best news in the world
is found by playing a simple scale on the piano.
I had no idea what she meant
So she told me to play an eight-note scale on the piano.
So I did.
[C D E F G A B C]*

*I said, "How is that good news?"
She said I had played it incorrectly, that I needed to play it the other way.
So I did.
[C B A G F E D C]*

*Again, I said, "How is that good news?"
And she said I played it the right way, but I needed to add the pauses.
The pauses?
She said, "The pauses.
Add them on the first, second, fourth, sixth, seventh, and last note."
Now I was frustrated.
I said, "How can 8 notes with random pauses be the best news in the world?
Then I got up, walked away and went outside.
Frankly I didn't care what she was talking about;
I didn't like playing the piano anyway.*

*Well, years later my mamma got sick and passed away.
As I was thinking about her, I remembered what she told me about the piano.
Not only that, I still remembered the notes she told me to pause.
The first, second, fourth, sixth, seventh, and last note
So I sat down at her piano and played the scale with the pauses.*

[C B A G F E D C]

(“Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”)

And that’s when I realized the Good News she was talking about.”

What Then Should We Do?

Repent.

Relate.

Rejoice.

We carry your joy everywhere, together,
out into the wilderness of God’s creation.

It is no small thing, my friends, to be people of courage,
a people who stand firm against prejudice and fear,
a people who preach and practice unconditional love.

Surely, we are journeying together out into the wilderness,
with a joy grounded in Jesus’ love.

For some of us the wilderness is right next door,
right by you at work,
right there in your classroom, right beside you at home.

When John says, “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,*”
is he pointing out a hurting, broken soul in our midst
as if to say, “Go there, and help to make a way to peace.”

For some of us the wilderness we are called into to meet our Lord and Savior
is right here in our day-to-day lives,
at work, at home, at play, at the store.

What Then Should We Do?

As we anticipate God in our future, we have this joy.

Nothing we will do or become
shall be beyond the scope
of God’s gladness and generosity.

When you look ahead, as John the Baptist did,
you and I see with the eyes of faith that Jesus Christ is already there.

Joy rises out of this faith.

Jesus and Others before Yourself

Donna Ross imagines what might happen if John the Baptizer
were to set up preaching camp in the middle of a modern-day shopping mall.

Now imagine this: in comes John, right into the mall.

It is deep winter, but he is wearing sandals on his bare feet,
shorts like Atlanta high school students wear even on the coldest day,
and, yes, John is wearing his camel hair coat, tied with a leather belt.

Now he strides through the double doors of the mall

and comes out into the open space near the fountain,
and he is crying out, *"Repent!"*

Unreal.

What has this awful man got to do with Christmas?
Get him out of here, so we can get our shopping done.
But wait -- imagine this.

John is a powerful preacher,
and the adults cease their frantic buying
and start to gather 'round him.

The teens stop their wandering to laugh,
but then they find themselves listening.

The children hear him, and start to leave Santa's line,
tugging on their parent's coats and asking questions.

"What is he doing?"

"What is he saying?"

"Why is he here?"

John is crying out: *"Repent! Turn around! Change your lives!"*

And John is such a powerful preacher that the lights,
the Muzak carols, the crèches, the shopping, even Santa's line
-- all are forgotten, and the people begin to ask, ***"What should we do?"***

And John says, *"Repent, and be baptized."*

Then he begins to baptize them in the beautiful mall fountain.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

To listen to "The Christmas Scale" please go to: <http://youtu.be/rNDtHdG5mVk>