

Advent 3 - Joy
Isaiah 12:2-6
Luke 3:7-18

Euch.

John the Baptist.

Such a downer.

It's so hard to tell if he's truly a holy prophet, or the coming Messiah, or just another crazy man out ranting in the desert.

But something in his words, in his message rang true, and the people came out to see him, and hear him. Some for the entertainment value, certainly – this was before On Demand and I-pods that hold 50,000 songs. But some came because they heard the truth ringing through his words. They recognized that reality check that what we say we believe and the way we live should be congruent; they should have integrity in the truest sense of that word, be one with each other. They recognized that we have to “walk the talk.”

John's prescription for preparing for God's realm, for the Messiah's rule still rings true today, too. Walk away from greed. Work for the common good without abusing or misusing your authority. Remember you are accountable for what you have and how you use it. That's pretty basic stuff – but it's also hard to do. Of course, remember Mom always told you that most things that are worth doing ARE hard to do.

This week I heard a segment on NPR where they played part of President Kennedy's speech about landing an American on the moon. Now, I really *was* a mere child when that speech was made, I don't remember it. But I was still moved by the power of it. Remember? He said, “*We choose to go to the moon in this decade, ... We choose to go to the moon and to do these other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.*”

I realize that my generation has had things very easy in our lives, and now many are amazed (and many feel cheated) because life is not easy. Now, compared to the rest of the world, most of us do not have it *hard*, but because it is not easy it feels hard. It's thrown us into a kind of freefall and we are anxious most of the time.

We know that anxiety is not unique to our time and culture. Necessity may be the mother of Invention, but anxiety is one of the primary motivators of human discover and achievement. It is what drives us to take care, to protect ourselves, to expand our resources and to try, desperately, to stave off death.

Certainly the Philippians would have known a great deal about anxiety. That small Christian community was in the middle of a leadership battle. The loving community which had attracted many of them to Christ, the stability which had comforted them in a chaotic world, was threatened by a disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche. And Paul, their beloved founding pastor, Paul was writing to them from a jail cell in Rome.

That was NOT a place anyone wanted to be. Yet from that place, to those people he writes: *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. (4:4-7)*

Rejoice in the Lord *always*.

Live in joy.

Now we know about pursuing happiness – it’s our inalienable right. And we have an entire culture whose mindset is that everything should be fun. And psychologists have identified “T-type” personalities – remember the “A” types who were over-achievers and work-aholics and prone to heart attacks, well, “T” types are thrill seekers who will make bad choices simply for the sake of the adrenaline rush they consequences will bring. But our culture is sadly lacking in *joy*. The astonishing statistics about people who are suffering from depression and mental illnesses that are often initiated by an emotional state which then becomes physically reactive are a sure sign of a lack of joy.

Joy is that amazing ability not to despair because we trust that the time for which we long is coming. Could there be a better example than the worship that grew up among American-African slaves, who celebrated and sang and clapped and danced, not because things were so good but because God is in charge.

Joy comes from knowing that you are where you are and joining with the people you should be with, and from knowing that the future is assured by God’s promise to us.

This does not mean you will always be happy! I read a story about a woman who was sharing with her Bible study group about a time when her life was unraveling and had been held together only by prayer. They asked her how long she had struggled that way and she answered, “Oh, about 20 years.” Martin Luther King Junior remarked that the purpose of life is not to be happy, nor to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, but that the purpose of life “is to do the will of God, come what may.”¹

While some of you may have had a clear moment of conversion, a light switch moment when your life focused changed forever, even you know that transformation is a lifelong process, a process of offering ourselves to God to be reshaped for the Kingdom of Christ.

Prayer is an answer to our anxieties, not because we expect God to “fix” our problems, but when we offer ourselves AND our problems to God we are allowing God to reshape them and us. And when we are reshaped we can look at our problems differently, sometimes even finding life where we thought there was nothing but death.

¹ *Strength to Love*, quoted in Philip E. Campbell, “Philippians 4:407, Pastoral Perspective”, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2009, p.66.

It is always about remembering that God is in charge, and not our troubles, our pains, our fears, our needs, our wants. And *this is* what *Christmas* is all about. That God can do this, will do this, because God shared our lives in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God has lived in a human being, with human limitations, human worries, human problems, and because of that Christ is near to us, with us right here, right now, today.

The best way to grow as a healthy church is to live as the household of faith, which Paul encourages the Philippians to be. And of course, in Paul's day the household wasn't just Mom and Dad with 2.3 children, a cat, a dog and a canary. It was multi-generation and included cousins and kissing cousins who had come to visit for anywhere from a week to 3 years. It included tradesmen who came to stay on their regular route and slaves and other folks who were somehow to each other and who all had a common goal, the health of that family. Paul tells the Philippians to have a common goal, a common mind, the mind of Christ.

I was troubled this week by an article in the *Christian Century* which noted that after 50 years of ecumenical work (and the word ecumenical means relating to the "household") Easter Orthodox bishops were considering ending relationships with Anglicans because of the ongoing practice of Anglicans consecrating women bishops. The Orthodox bishops felt that they could not be in relationship with a church where women were given authority over the church. Now, obviously as an ordained woman, I find that troubling. And I thought, "Why can't they just accept that we have a different calling but serve the same Christ?" But of course, we are guilty of that kind of thinking. Why should Baptists look down on Catholics, or Presbyterians on Pentecostals? Why can't we share our love for Christ and celebrate the different ministries and styles of worship and understandings of organization to which He calls us?

We wonder about a generation who say that they like Jesus but can't stand the Church. Is it our gentleness/compassion/generosity/consideration for others that we show the world? Or is it our bickering, our power plays, our anxiety about money, our fear that we might be wrong and if we are not right, then all is lost? Must you be wrong in order for me to be right? Is our own anxiety limiting our witness to Christ's transforming power?

Eugene Peterson reworks Paul's words this way: "*Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute! Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.*"(The Message)

May Christ's presence at the center of your life infuse you with joy. Amen.