

With Joy You Will Draw Water from the Wells
Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18
Advent 3: *Gaudete* (Rejoice)

Isaiah 12:2-6

²Surely 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.

³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴And 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. ⁵Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Luke 3:7-18

⁷John 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? ⁸Bear 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.

⁹Even 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.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

¹⁴Soldiers 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.”

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

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

The Sermon

Three friends and I were among tens of thousands making our way into a stadium in Indianapolis.

I'd been there before under similar circumstances, for major concerts and huge sporting events.

So I recognized, in the vast entrance grounds between the parking lot and the arena, the impromptu kiosk with hand painted signs referencing John 3:16 and other Bible quotations,

and I recognized the scowling woman standing there, looking angry, frazzled and disgusted, loudly and condescendingly haranguing with bitter sarcasm the crowds pouring by in the thousands.

“That’s right, people, go to your game. Go to your concert. Don’t even think about Judgement Day; just go get your tickets and your popcorn...”

As our walking path took us right by the evangelist and her booth of Christian love and acceptance, my friend Kurt—tall, handsome and fit; long-haired, affable and confident—and a lifelong Presbyterian—

reached out to accept the doomsday flier the lady had been offering (without previous success),

and as he received it from her, midstride, and we all continued walking, he said, warmly, “Thank you! Smile!”

We didn’t stop to gauge her response, but a few steps later we could hear the diatribe resume and fade into the background as

the crowd flowed by. “That’s right, people, go to your concert....”

John the Baptist said to the crowds that came out to be baptized: “You’re so wonderful; and listen, whatever you’ve done, or haven’t done, it’s OK. God understands.”

No, he didn’t! His Ritual of Fellowship starts off:

“You brood of vipers! When are you going to start bearing fruit that’s even worthy of repentance, let alone worthy in its own right?” In other words, when it comes to using your life to make other people’s lives better, you haven’t even tried hard enough to do it wrong. You don’t even have good intentions!

“And don’t give me that entitled attitude about ‘Well, we’re in the right faith tradition, we’re Abraham’s people.’

“So what? God doesn’t need members of the family just to be members of the family; if all God needed were more members of the family, God could turn these stones into members of the family.

“But let’s go back to the thing about bearing fruit. There is an ax lying at the root of the trees. It doesn’t matter if you’re a member of the family tree: if you’re a tree that doesn’t bear fruit in the world, you’re going to get cut down and thrown into the fire, no matter who you are.”

And the people ate it up! They *loved* this; they couldn’t get enough. And they came out in greater and greater numbers.

Generations later, there was even a persistent pocket of believers who thought that *John* was the messiah, to the extent that the gospels had to make it clear that John himself said that he wasn't the messiah, but his life's call was to get the people *ready* for the coming of the messiah.

Back in the 1990s, an evangelical company produced a live-action video of the Gospel according to Matthew, using for the script literally every word of the NIV translation, in part by cleverly having Matthew dictate the gospel to a scribe, sometimes offscreen and sometimes on. So not a word is added, and not a word is taken out from Matthew's gospel.

It was a neat video, and I used it a lot especially with youth groups over the years.

But it was always a bit jarring at one point, when Jesus and John the Baptist had their first scene together.

For John, they had cast a Shakespearian actor with fire and passion and massive stage presence: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

For the Jesus role—and this was a major interpretive focus of the film—they had cast somebody much younger, an American actor with a gentle, soft-spoken kind of approach.

So every time I showed this part, there was a moment of unintentional comedy when Jesus appeared as an adult for the first time and spoke his first line, especially coming right on the heels of the actor playing John the Baptist with his thunderous English diction: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

And the guy playing Jesus says, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” It sounded like Charlton Heston trying to have a conversation with Mr. Rogers.

This Jesus is a non-anxious presence who laughs easily and a lot, and the crowds respond in kind.

It’s a totally legitimate interpretive touch, the same way a preacher’s inflections during a scripture reading convey interpretive meaning.

This is the Jesus who will say in the same gospel:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from *me*; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

That sounds like a very different message from what John the Baptist was promising. But it’s not one or the other. It’s a tension that exists throughout all of the gospels—as it does in the lives of all Christians, across time and throughout the world.

So today is not really a break from the demands of Advent.

It's an occasion to remember and celebrate
 that God does make serious demands;
 that the uncompromising love that Jesus teaches
 is going to lead to some conflict—
 often within ourselves,
 but also with the people and the forces around us
 who want to make sure that our love for all people
 doesn't threaten their status quo.

This Joy Sunday

is an occasion to remember and celebrate the fact
 that joy as a condition of the heart and the mind—
 joy in the life-defining, existential experience
 of knowing that nothing in life or in death
 can separate you from the love God in Christ—
 the *condition* of joy, doesn't depend
 on every day bringing sunshine,
 or every Christmastime bringing cozy days with snow
 outside and a fire in the fireplace and everybody singing in
 church and in the public square, without masks and without
 restrictions.

This Joy Sunday

is an occasion to remember and celebrate the fact
 that joy is deeper, and richer, and more fulfilling
 and infinitely sturdier than that.

Fred Craddock used to have a prayer that he would say when he got out of bed in the morning:

“O God, I thank you for a way of life that is more important than how I happen to feel about it on any given day.”

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation,” said Isaiah at a time when that was anything but obvious.

“And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD.”

When I was a kid in the 1970s and 80s, and would stay with my grandmother, who had immigrated to this country from Serbia many decades earlier as Zagorka Jovanovic Josefovic, after I had gone to bed, I would hear her at night, whispering her prayers.

She prayed directly to Jesus; and the prayers always sounded fervent, even if I couldn't hear the words; but when I could occasionally overhear, they were prayers of praise, and desperate pleas for the protection of her children and grandchildren.

She had spent the first 20 years of her life in the Eastern Orthodox church in Yugoslavia, where in her childhood there was always war—no school; no playtime; just war. And then she had moved with her husband to a thriving farm in rural north central Indiana, which is not noted for having a preponderance of Serbian Orthodox cathedrals. But she was visited regularly, over fifty years, by successive pastors from the Church of God, which *is* a big presence in rural northern Indiana.

From her Orthodox upbringing came awe, and a sense of God's beauty and majesty; and from the Olive Branch Church of God came an appreciation for the fundamental place of the Bible in everyday life.

She told me once that when you are praying and you feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, that's when you *know* the angels are listening.

She had known war, and pain, and loss, and displacement, and endless worry for her boys (she had all boys). One of the four had died in childhood, and it goes without saying that she never got over it.

And there were all kinds of injuries that could happen on the farm. And there were armed, ignorant neighbors who called my grandfather Foreign George, and accused them of being on the side of the Germans in World War II because they talked funny and weren't from around here.

But the primary witness I can give you to the life of Zagorka Jovanovic Josefovic—known in America as Cora Grogg and in my family as Maw-Maw—is that there was a joy in her life, because upholding her life, and the universe in which God had called her into being, was an inalienable relationship with her maker and savior.

What is your joy? And where is the well of your joy—not your momentary pleasure or escape or happiness, but your sustaining joy?

And what does it take—what needs to happen; or what do you need to do, or maybe stop doing, in order for you to be able to draw water from that well? ...

Once, when I was a teenager, and Maw-Maw had been moved to a house in my hometown, I popped over to her place, as I would sometimes do on a Sunday morning, unannounced, after I'd been to worship in the tall-steeple church that I grew up in.

I gave a tap on the screen door and pushed it open, and as always, she treated it as if my coming over to her place was the greatest thing that had ever happened. She'd been sitting in front of the TV, and I noticed on the side table a little plastic coffee cup with some water in it, and a small plate with a corner of a piece of bread. She made to shut off the TV and welcome me into the house, but I realized that in the church service she was watching on TV, they were just about to have communion, and she had gathered her private elements and was going to join in.

I never trust it when somebody says they know what somebody else was feeling, but I believed then as I do now, that that simple, solitary, makeshift communion was a private celebration of a deep joy—a moment of drawing water from the well of salvation, one more time.

I go back to the fearsome prophecy of John the Baptist,
reminding us all

that our call is real, and serious,
and requires our eyes to be wide open
in regard to how prepared we really are
for the coming of Christ,

and how the Almighty Creator God is not to be trifled with,
and those who ignore or take advantage of the powerless
are going to hear from the God of love and justice,
and “having meant well” isn’t going to count for much
as long as hunger, hatred and injustice
are allowed to stalk the world,
especially the less privileged parts of the world:

“His winnowing fork is in his hand,” said John the Baptist, “to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff—the useless, ineffectual, unfaithful, unfruitful chaff—he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

And I remember that Luke records those very words of John the Baptist, and then tells us the Christmas message that we should be listening for underneath all of John’s bluster, in verse 18:

“So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to all the people.”

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

*Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

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