

## Sermon "From John the Baptist to Joy"

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### 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.

<sup>3</sup> With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. <sup>4</sup> And you will say on that day:

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;

make known his deeds among the nations;

proclaim that his name is exalted.

<sup>5</sup> Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;

let this be known \* in all the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal \* Zion,

for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

### Luke 3: 7-18

<sup>7</sup> 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?' <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Even now the axe 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.'

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'

<sup>12</sup> Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?'

<sup>13</sup> He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' <sup>14</sup> 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.'

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, \* <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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 “From John the Baptist to Joy”**

It’s the third Sunday of Advent. We just lit the candle of joy. Isaiah speaks of joy, telling the people to shout for joy for the glorious things God has done.

But Luke offers us John the Baptist. We know John, that prophet who lived in the wilderness and looked the part – wearing long hair which he was not supposed to cut, a shirt of camel hair (which makes me itchy just thinking of it) and leather belt. And he eats locusts.. It’s not an image we would expect to see under the word Joy on the front of a Christmas card. John the Baptist is not someone that Hallmark would put on a Christmas card. Nor is he someone we would likely invite to our Christmas party.

In fact, if John walked into most churches wearing his camel hair shirt, leather belt, and offering to share locusts and honey with us, we might even worry about his mental health. And we would probably not want to hear John preaching to us – not those of you in the pews or me in the pulpit. We would not want to hear him tell us that being Christian does not give us greater standing with God, that he could raise up children of God from the stones on the ground. And warning us that

“the axe 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.’ would not be terribly uplifting.

So just as we probably would not ask John to come into our church to preach, he was not seen in the synagogues of his day either. He was miles away from any synagogue. Yet people of faith, or people who wanted something more, or those who wanted to better understand what their faith required of them, flocked to him. There was something different about him that drew crowds to him and to the river Jordan where he would submerge them into the water to baptize them. Maybe it was his message – telling people to share what they had, to not cheat anyone, to not lord power over others – a simple but direct message. Or maybe it was his delivery and his willingness to get into the river with them. Or maybe it was that he lived his preaching. I don’t know. But whatever John possessed, he would preach and cleanse people of sin so that they might turn their lives around. John is calling for transformation.

In his book, William Bausch shares this story about Teddy. Teddy was a student in Miss Thompson’s class. He was not one of the brighter students. In fact, he came to school a little disheveled, with messed up hair and wrinkled clothing. He had a flat affect and did not engage in anything. He was not easy to warm up to. While Miss Thompson loved all her students, she had to admit that she had a hard time warming up to Teddy and that for some reason she felt a certain perverse pleasure when she put X’s next the wrong answers on Teddy’s papers. And when he failed, she put a little flair into the F’s. There was just something about Teddy...

Now Miss Thompson was aware of his record,

In first grade he showed potential but his home situation was “Poor.”

In second grade - he received very little help at home, his mom was seriously ill, he could “do better.”

In third grade he was good, but a slow learner and too serious. “His mom died this year.”

Fourth grade. He continued to be a good boy but very slow. His dad showed little interest.

Then something unexpected happened at Miss Thompson’s class Christmas party. The students had brought her gifts, which she opened at her desk. There was even a gift from Teddy. She had not expected one. And when Miss Thompson unwrapped the brown paper bag, out fell a rhinestone bracelet with stones missing and a partial bottle of cheap perfume. The other students laughed at these tokens. But then Miss Thompson put on the bracelet and dabbed a touch of perfume onto her wrist, saying how lovely they were. And the students changed their tune, oohing and aahing.

Freddie hung around after everyone else left. He told Miss Thompson that he was glad she liked his presents. He told her she smelled just like his mother and that his mother’s bracelet looked pretty on her.

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson dropped to her knees and begged God’s forgiveness.

When the children returned to class, Miss Thompson was a different person – more patient, more kind, and more loving. She gave the slower students, especially Teddy, more attention. By the end of the year, Teddy had caught up to grade level. Miss Thompson had been transformed and become a better person.

Years later, Miss Thompson received a letter from Teddy telling her he was graduating second in his class.

Four years after that she received another letter from Teddy saying he was graduating from the university, first in his class.

Four years after that, she received another letter, telling her “as of today, I am Theodore Stallard, MD. How about that?” It also said he was getting married. He invited her to his wedding and asked her to sit where his mother would have sat. His father had died and Teddy told Miss Thompson that she was “the only family I have now.”

Miss Thompson attended Teddy’s wedding and sat in the seat that would have been his mother’s.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we seek or need a John the Baptist, to point out the ways we fail to serve our God and to admonish us to turn away from our sins - whatever separates us from God. He tells us to transform our lives.

Sometimes we need a Teddy to help us to look at ourselves - our prejudices, our actions, and our lives, and to help us recognize our need to change, to be a more loving and caring person.

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<sup>1</sup> Bausch, William J., “The Gift that Lives On,” A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers. (New London, CT: Twenty Third Publications. 2007 p. 95-97.)

When our lives are transformed and we live in ways that are pleasing to God, we open ourselves to joy. When lives are transformed; unforeseen things, unimaginable things, maybe even miracles can happen.

This morning we light the Advent Candle of Joy. We await the birth of the Christ Child. As we gaze upon that flame, let us ask ourselves what we need to transform our lives so that we can bring the light of joy into the hurting places of our world.