“Fire and Joy”


Part III of VI in “A Light to the Nations” Advent Sermon Series

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 3, December 12, 2021, dedicated to men and women who built First Congregational Church at 444 East Broad St. 90 years ago this week, to our new members, Camille and Matt Bendick, Greg Duncan and Gary Glover, Bryn and Chuck Haggins, Rose and David Kandel, and Emily Wilson and to their children and loved ones, to Grace Glaros at Nationwide Children’s Hospital this morning and her parents Chris and Lauren and brother Lincoln and always to the glory of God!

“Fire and Joy”


Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

The Third Sunday of Advent is known as the Sunday of Joy. Today we have lit the third candle, the Pink or Rose candle, it is symbolic of the transition from repentance to the joy of Jesus’ birth – just days away at this point. The baby is almost here and you can hear the tapping toes at this point. Delivering mothers aren’t tapping their toes. They are just “ready.” First time fathers are beside themselves. And grandparents are knocking at the door and standing at the
window day and night – without any boundaries whatsoever. And in our Advent waiting for Jesus, we feel in our bones that Salvation is at hand.

Joy is alive in the all texts of scripture today. In Zechariah 3, Isaiah 12, Philippians 4 and Luke 3, there is a consistent theme of joy over what God has done and what God will do. It is not a giddy senseless joy, unaware of the harsh realities of human situation, but a joy that is anchored in God’s love and presence in human life and reality. This joy takes seriously the distance between God’s hope for human life, on the one hand, and the realities of that life as it is actually lived, on the other hand is tough at times. And it makes room for this joy in wonderful ways even in spite of all the challenges of life. It is a joy that is all the more intense because it is kindled amid circumstances in which joy is least expected.

In the prophecy of Zechariah, some of the most despairing passages of Hebrew Scripture appear. Following the reign of evil King Manasseh – who occupied the throne for 45 years (687-642 BCE) over 2800 years ago the condition of life in those times was depressing. Through his lies, deceit and destruction of people, the narcissistic Manasseh left the nation in ruins. Addressing these conditions, the prophet sounds depressed most of the time. Then, all the sudden without any warning, he blurts out and declares, “Rejoice and exalt with all your heart” (3:14). Literally, this comes out of the blue. The reason for this new exaltation is that, “Yahweh (God) is in your midst.” God removes the clouds and day breaks before them.

Isaiah 12:2-6 serves as the Psalm of the day and it too sings of joy. After eleven chapters of oracles directed at Jerusalem, again crying out about the waywardness of the people, the prophet – all
the sudden, out of nowhere - turns to joy. This joy compels faith and trust as people wait for and receive the gracious and loving outpouring of God’s mercy. Waiting for salvation’s arrival requires faith and trust. It requires strength and might. It requires conviction and hope. God’s Salvation is at hand and Isaiah is singing with a heart of pure joy.

Do you see the pattern here? Joy doesn’t come out of happiness that preceded it just seconds before. Joy comes out of pain. It comes out of despair. It comes out of the tough things of our lives.

Philippians 4:4-7 continues the joy fest! The presence of God in coming of Jesus Christ reorients the life of every believer. Because women and men of faith, we have reason to rejoice. Here we are called to live gently, to stop worrying about everything and instead give thanks to God and finally – these wonderful words that can stay with us throughout times but here we receive them in their original delivery source: “let the peace that passes human understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

While this may sound very simplistic, it is grounded in the strong belief that “the Lord is near” (4:5). It is ever true that this dose of joy that Philippians brings us continues to come from this ground of our understanding – that the joy of our lives comes from the nearness of God. (Drawn from Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year C, editors: Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James D. Newsome, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, pp. 19-28.)

By the time we arrive at our fourth text this morning – Luke 3:7-18, we are dancing with joy! And all the sudden breaks get put on – because joy meets fire. The fire line is drawn by John the Baptist. He
looks at his congregation who have come from everywhere to gather at the Jordan River and he yells, “You brood of vipers!” That is quite a way to begin a sermon – don’t you think? – especially when everyone is trying so hard to get back to joy! It’s sort of like coming back from a pandemic – the first thing you hear coming back in the room is “You brood of vipers.” It’s enough to scare you.

And everyone in the congregation thinks he is speaking to everyone else. It must be the tax collectors and soldiers. It can’t be the poor in need of a blessing and searching for joy. John never says who the brood of vipers are so we have to assume it is the whole brood standing in front of John and not just a few snakes in the grass.

Anyway, you can see where joy has taken a beating here. While some may find it rude for the preacher to call a congregation, “a brood of vipers,” John doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about rude. After all, he dresses in camel hair, eats locusts and wild honey for sustenance and nutrition and he lives alone in the desert. He has not come to make friends. He has come to declare the promises of God to the people of God. He has come to proclaim the Savior is at hand – that the Light to the nations is about to arrive. Like the prophet Zachariah, Isaiah and Paul, John’s focus is on justice, compassion and honesty. He is interested in helping people escape the wrath of God that is coming unless they reorder their lives and get their collective and individual acts together.

This passage turns on one question which keeps coming up from every group that’s in “the brood” – the poor, the tax collectors and the soldiers. They ask the same question. It is a question that comes from them in a very deep way. They are very concerned about this question. It is this. Simply this:
“What should we do?” What should we do?

John answers. First, John says, “feed the hungry and clothe the naked.” John knows and we know too, that God created the world with enough resources for everybody. We end up with poverty because people with power and wealth want more and are greedy and the balance gets tossed on its head and the poor suffer in the face of true imbalances.

Greed destroys joy.

It destroys balance in life and creates a world like – well – like the one we are facing today. And let me tell you, you don’t have to look far to answer the question, “What should we do?” The answer is literally right outside our door on the Broad Street steps where two or three or four men huddle together every night just trying to survive the cold with thin blankets while sleeping on stone. They work. All of them are working. But they don’t have homes. They feel safe here under the archway of our beautiful cathedral but now as the weather turns, they are literally freezing to death and have no place to keep warm.

Just this week, I received a call from Pastor Benjamin Morris and his wife, Pamela who come to our Broad Street steps to feed and care for the men who are sleeping there. They have been doing this for almost a year and I had no idea they were doing it. In his sweet, loving, kind, direct way, Pastor Morris, from his heart and in his love for Jesus Christ, asked me what we were doing and what Jesus would do if he saw men sleeping on the steps of the temple. He wanted to know. I was embarrassed, humbled and ashamed by the question Benjamin and Pamela were asking. I had no good answer. I have done a few things myself – but not enough. I need an answer. We need an
answer – because no answer is not good enough. So the question in Luke’s gospel comes to us – “What should we do?”

We should figure out something to do. We need to answer this question and figure out a way to help and Pastor Morris and Pamela have said to me, “We will help your church with this.” Wow!

So, we need to help the men who are trying to survive outside our doors each night. In the months before, it was rough for them to be there. Now, in the cold, it has become inhumane for them. How can we care for Ray and Tony and Dennis and the others that are there?

Beyond the poor, John answers the tax collectors who ask, “What should we do?” John answers simply, “Don’t do any more than the Romans force you to do.” He tells the tax collectors to join the resistance to Rome. He doesn’t tell them to stop collecting taxes. He simply tells them to do the bare minimum. In labor management circles, this is called, “Work to Rule: to do exactly what is written down in the rules and not a thing more.” We all know, the world (and the empire) grinds to a halt in a hurry under such circumstances. It is not going to last long if we all do what is written in our job description and nothing more.

The soldiers have come as well. They ask, “What should we do?” John answers simply, “Do not use your weapons and your power to injure people.” He doesn’t tell soldiers not to be soldiers. He tells them to be kind to human beings under their power. He wants leaders with weapons not to use their weapons against people.

The Joy of the Gospel, the call to follow Jesus with joyful hearts should lead us all to answer the question, “What should we do?” John’s answers are simple: feed the hungry and provide clothing and
protection for those who are naked or under-clothed; don’t hurt people economically by extorting them in whatever ways you able and don’t hurt people physically by treating them as less than human.

Joy comes when justice, compassion and honesty join together. Joy is a choice. Henri Nouwen once wrote, ‘Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.’

“What should we do?” as we look at things around us and wonder what in the world we should to do to make a difference. The answer is simple – “Choose Joy.” In the words of Joseph Campbell, “Find a place inside where there’s joy, and the joy will burn out the pain.”

And that is the place where fire and joy meet. Amen.