

Advent 3C - Church of the Messiah  
December 15, 2024  
The Rev. Emily E. Given

*(Please note, this is a set of sermon notes and not a formal manuscript.)*

“You brood of vipers!”

These would not be the first words that come to mind if I were looking “to make friends and influence people.” The volume of this “voice crying in the wilderness” is turned WAY up, and John’s message has a different urgency than we heard last week. He went from “pay attention, prepare the way” to “you brood of vipers, watch out... see that ax just laying there ready to chop down your metaphorical tree.”

John’s passion was focused on waking people from their sleeping. The essence of his message - Don’t miss this precious gift being offered to you.. To us.

And yet, there is John, doing what prophets do best - unsettling us with his words... and relaying truths that make us pause. “Good News” doesn’t always sound like good news when we first hear it.

John warns those living throughout the region surrounding the Sea of Galilee - “Don’t fool yourselves!... Hey people, you can’t just sit back and bank on the fact that you have Abraham and Sarah as your ancestors. Being children of God is not just about claiming your connection to the past. Keeping the covenant means bearing good fruit now. But I don’t want us to get confused. It’s not all about what we do, it is about how we stay in relationship with God. Nurturing the relationship and staying aware of the gift.

Through the passing down of scripture, John is warning us, too. Does this resonate at all? Where might we be making assumptions that we don’t need to be actively engaging in a relationship with God because Jesus already did it all for us? In short - are there places that we are “phoning it in” instead of staying connected? Where is God looking to draw closer to you?

Advent is an introduction to who Jesus is. A radical arrival in our midst of a God made flesh. The ultimate level of closeness.

So why is this piece of the Gospel showing John the Baptist filled with exclamation points given to us on “Joy Sunday”? I must admit that I don’t imagine Jesus the way John describes him, with a winnowing fork in hand...some of us stored up in barns and some of us thrown in the fire. The way I suggest we look at this passage is that we each have both wheat and chaff within us. There is an opportunity to be refined and renewed. Having a God whose aim is to restore us to our fullest selves. That is the source of our joy.

Repeatedly in the Gospel today we hear people asking “What should we do?” The question made me think of a book I read about two years ago - *The Book of Joy* by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama,

and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. At the time, there was a member at my last church who was very interested in being a screening location for *The Joy Project* documentary so I wanted to do my homework to see if would be a right fit for the church.

What I found was a set of eight pillars that opened my heart and mind to an enduring sense of joy.

The pillars are:

Perspective. Taking the long view instead of getting wrapped up in short-sightedness.

Humility. The ability to stay grounded. The balance of worth. Not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less.

Humor. Don't take life too seriously. Not to make light of the world, but to see a glimpse of our common humanity. What they called the "liberation of laughter."

Acceptance. The ability to go on but not give up. To stop arguing with reality but to keep hope in your view.

Forgiveness. Releasing ourselves from the thoughts that keep us stuck. This includes self-forgiveness.

Gratitude. Shifting our viewpoint from "not enough" to abundance". Abiding appreciation, not just temporary happiness.

Compassion. Placing ourselves in the same space with others to expand our understanding. To offer a sense of shared humanity.

And...

Generosity. Recognizing our natural desire to reach out to one another. To share what we have so that our joy can also be shared. Most of all, offering our presence.

This is both headwork and heartwork. It takes our personal resolve but we don't take on any of this alone. This sense of true joy is rooted in the One who created us with the capacity to exercise all of these 8 pillars.

Eight pillars might seem like a tall order. Like always, each of us is a work in progress. There is grace. We might be led to ask the same question repeated in the Gospel of Luke "Teacher, what should we do?"

Maybe we start by embodying a few of the action words found in Zephaniah that point us toward simplicity and reconciliation.

Rejoice...Remove...Restore.

Rejoice.  
Remove.  
Restore.

And I believe Jesus WILL meet us there.

*Amen.*