



## “A Royal Welcome: Welcoming Joy”

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*Luke 3:7-18*

A lot of preachers like to begin their sermons with some sort of liturgical or repetitive formula, like “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” to which an “Amen” from the congregation is expected. Others begin with, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” I hear that one a lot. And we ourselves open our services here at Royal Lane with, “The Lord be with you!” “And also with you!” These ways to start a worship service or a sermon are uplifting and joyful, right? What if, instead, I began each sermon with the inspiring phrase, “You brood of vipers!” I mean, John the Baptist did it.

As you remember from last week, John had already called up the words of Isaiah that said someone was coming and that he was to prepare a way for them. But then the sermon changed and John pronounced these disconcerting words for today. “You brood of vipers!” And again, just like the past two weeks of Advent, I think there is meaning in these difficult lectionary texts. These hard, biblical passages call us to think about the season of Advent in a different way, how we might move through our difficult lives and actually get to Christmas with our hope, peace, joy and love intact.

And I know it is hard to believe, but John the Baptist was actually welcoming joy into the world. We saw in last Sunday’s Gospel reading that John issued a ringing call to prepare the way for the Lord. And in order to prepare for the good news that was coming, all of the places of power would be made low and the crooked places would be made straight. The topography of power had to change so that a humble Messiah could be born in Bethlehem, placed in a manger, grow up in Nazareth, and now come to stand in the throngs of humanity to show the crowds what living a repentant life looked like.

And John the Baptist, in today’s reading, not only told the people to repent because the Messiah was coming, but John spelled out what repentance looked like: that people are transformed and changed, that their actions reveal good fruit. According to John, simply speaking words of repentance is empty if those words don’t result in actually bringing hope, peace, joy, and love to the world. John said that fruitless trees would be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

And so, John’s challenge to fruitful living provoked an important question from his newly repentant hearers. They asked, “What then shall we do?” And this question came from the crowd in general, and so John replied to everyone. He said, “Do you own two shirts? You have more than you need. Do you have food? Share it, give some away.” John knew that great joy happens when people help one another, take care of those who don’t have enough to survive. Joy is welcomed when we seek to change the systems of injustice in our world. And this good news changes people. It was not just about changing emotions, but about changed ways of living. If

the crowds were expecting a little dunk in the Jordan River to bring them joy, then they hadn't heard the words of John the Baptist as spoken in our gospel lesson for today. John called out for us to "do fruits worthy of repentance." If we are to bring the good news of Christ to the world and to welcome in joy, we must change lives.

John Petty, a Lutheran pastor who does extensive research in theology, politics, and culture, helped answer John's question to the crowds about what they needed to do to bear good fruit. Petty says, "If you have two tunics, and someone has none, give one of yours away. This was a somewhat bigger deal than it might appear. Tunics were the undergarment one wore underneath their coat. Most people had two of them, one they wore every day, and another they wore for sabbath. John [the Baptist] seems to be saying that the needs of your neighbor outweigh saving the sabbath tunic – or, to put it a different way, deeds of compassion outweigh the practice of religion."

Then, we see after asking the people to give away their extra tunic and food, John the Baptist gets even more specific by calling out the tax collectors and the soldiers. Now, these weren't noble professions back in Jesus's day. These were two jobs where the people could get away with harsh practices and could seriously hurt the population. John asked the tax collectors and the soldiers to move beyond the sharing of tunics and food and to actually address their behaviors that caused poverty. John told them to stop abusing people in order to make more money. Don't take more than the minimum, don't shake people down, and don't blackmail them. John was calling for tax collectors and soldiers to not use their power to threaten the people and steal from them. No, they were to be fair and honest and just. John's call to repentance was a call to radical transformation. And it was in that transformation and changing of lives that the world would be able to feel and experience true joy. Bearing good fruit is the good news of great joy!

And that's how John the Baptist ended his sermon to the crowd in the wilderness. It says, "So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people." You know, when I first read this I thought, Really? Where is the good news? If this is John's idea of good news, I hate to see the bad news. And since today is the third Sunday of Advent, we should really be focusing on joy, the joy that comes when Jesus is born. I mean, John was baptizing people and changing their lives. That is very joyful! So, shouldn't he have had a more joyful message instead of a sermon entitled, "You Brood of Vipers?" We can't say thanks be to God with a sermon title like that. But John got everyone's attention, didn't he? John made it clear that he was talking to each one of us, that we are all a mixture of good and evil, of wheat and chaff, and that we all must be transformed into people of great joy.

John didn't pull any punches with the crowds and I don't want to with you either. I know we are all struggling with our water and fire natures, with the good and evil in us. But I want to tell you the truth. And don't worry, I'm not going to call you a brood of vipers. I am going to call you a church of great joy! Be people of joy! Welcome joy into your lives and into your hearts. For if you do, others will follow the illumination of Christ in you. No one wants to follow a brood of vipers, slithering along, belly to the dirt. No, people want to follow the newborn Christ, the one who cries out from a manger. People want to follow the tears of Mary, tears of pain and labor, but also tears of great joy as well.

And if I were to be John the Baptist today, I would ask you what places in your life are stealing your joy? What places need to be winnowed, like chaff, and burned away so that you can welcome Jesus, the bringer of joy? I know that I need to get rid of judgment. I judge people entirely too much when I really need to understand we are all a mixture of good things and bad things. I also need to get rid of worry. And I need to get rid of impatience. I need to learn to wait in the wilderness, like I said last week. Because it is in this wilderness and in the waiting of Advent that our hearts and our lives are baptized into hope, peace, joy, and love. And before we can fully celebrate Christmas and know the full impact of the joy, the peace, the hope, the love that comes through the one born in Bethlehem, we too must pass through the wilderness. During this season of Advent, let us not be in such a hurry. Because it is in the wilderness that we are transformed, that we are changed, that we find joy.

You see, the crowd down by the Jordan could have had a great time and gone home and not done anything with their newly baptized lives. But when John told the crowds that great joy was coming to the world in the form of the Messiah, this was life-changing good news. John was proclaiming a new faith shown in a new baptism, not merely of ritual and religion but one of the Holy Spirit and transformation and joy. The good news for us today is that the holy time of Advent and Christmas can be so much more than traditions and memories. Christmas is about the transforming power of the presence of Christ in our lives. And as we welcome the good news of great joy, we must remember that John the Baptist has asked us to do something. John has asked us to change the world, to give up our extra tunics, to provide extra food, to not cheat people out of money, and to not hurt people and put people down. John has asked us to be transformed. Then... and only then... will our work as Christians this Advent season actually bring joy to the world.

The story has been told of Abraham Lincoln who worshiped each and every Wednesday when in Washington D.C. at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church near the White House. One Wednesday evening as Lincoln was leaving the service, one of his assistants asked him: "Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon tonight?" Lincoln responded, "The content was excellent, and Dr. Gurley spoke with great eloquence. It was obvious that he put a great deal of work into that sermon." "Then you thought it was a great sermon, Mr. President?" the assistant asked. "No, I did not say that." "But Sir, you said it was excellent sermon." Lincoln replied, "No, I said that content was excellent and that the preacher spoke with eloquence. But Dr. Gurley, on this night, forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great."

John the Baptist has done my job for me. He asked the crowd that day as I am asking you today, to do something great. In order to be people of repentance, who will bring the gospel, the good news of great joy to all people, let us focus on how we can lead generous and changed lives. And we do this not only because we want to welcome joy into the world, but because we are about to welcome the Messiah into the world as well. And that's the good news. So, as we stare into the light of the rose-colored candle of joy, may we find ways this Advent season to show people the one who is coming who is greater than all of us, the one, who with subversive and subtle power, gave up everything so that the world could be changed. That is indeed good news. Let us be a transformed people who welcome joy.

Amen.