

### 3 Advent December 15, 2024 Reason to Rejoice

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What is with John the Baptist in the Gospel this morning? Seems like he forgot to read the other readings in the lectionary before he preached a fire and brimstone sermon. All the other lessons today, including the canticle, are about rejoicing; and at the start of the service, we lit the rose-colored candle that represents joy. Perhaps that is a characteristic of prophets: they don't conform well to expectations.

Instead of celebrating the number and diversity of people who responded to his invitation; the people who traveled outside the city walls to the river to be baptized, John greeted them with what sounds like name calling and accusations of being selfish rather than truly wanting to change their relationship with God.

In our modern times, when taking offense and righteous indignation are too often the first response to everything from feedback to jokes, it might be difficult to recognize John's message was joyful, and really is the good news the author of Luke mentioned in the last sentence of today's Gospel.

To recognize the good news, it might help for us to remember joy is not a hyper form of happiness. Nor is rejoicing an over-the-top celebration. Joy is deeper than happiness, it is an emotional response to sensing God's presence and our connection to God. Rejoicing is recognition of God's presence, of being connected to something larger than ourselves that is wonderful, good, and beyond our comprehension. Sometimes rejoicing resembles relief, other times it might manifest as excitement, or anticipation of what might happen next. That is why many of our readings connect rejoicing with liberation, freeing people to do something new or different, and counsels them to not worry, and practice gratitude. Our readings also reveal rejoicing helps bring peace, not necessarily the absence of conflict, but the peace of God.

Which brings us back to John the Baptist yelling at the people who were about to be baptized. In addition to the name calling, he was asking them to make some changes. No longer could they rely on their history to define their relationship with God or claim privilege over others.

After all that shouting, there is no mention was made of anyone storming off or giving his sermon a negative review on Google. Instead, the people seemed to be ready to receive what he was saying. They appeared to trust him. Perhaps this was the first piece of good news, a reason for joy, for relief, that they didn't have to try and live up to expectations that were no longer realistic or relevant. Perhaps systems had changed, and no longer supported people like they used to. We aren't given the particulars. It just seems the people sensed that by inviting them into something new, they felt some freedom they hadn't before. Which might be why they asked a very good question: what should we do?

John's answers were not elaborate. He did not ask people to leave their jobs, move to a new place, or change their name. He asked them to share, to treat people fairly, and with respect.

These are simple things. Some might say it sounds like lessons we might have received when we were children. For those who have more than enough, share what you have. Easy, right? Most of our ministries here at St. Matthias are based on sharing: The mitten and hat giveaway our pastoral care team organized started with someone asking how to share a surplus of hats. The little free pantry on the corner that same team keeps stocked is sharing food with anyone and everyone. At Tom's Table we not only share food, we share fellowship. Caritas is based on sharing resources with those in immediate need. Sharing reminds us we are not alone, that we are here for each other, and there is no shame in receiving just as there is no superiority in giving. Sharing is something we can all do and is a reason to rejoice.

Then the Gospel reading goes a little deeper by giving attention to some of the specific groups of people who had come for baptism. One of those groups was tax collectors, who might have been

mentioned because at the time they were people who would not have been expected to show up to John's baptism. They were people who both benefitted from and abused the system. I don't know if this applied to all tax collectors, there are usually exceptions to every caricature and stereotype. But tax collectors were associated with bribery and wealth they attained by cheating their own people. In other words, were considered unethical, and not to be trusted.

Yet, there they were, like the crowds, asking John the Baptist what they should do to change. And John told them something simple: don't cheat, don't ask for unfair taxes. It is possible that the tax collectors behaved the way they did because it was accepted by the government and society, or they were expected to do so, or were treated unfairly by their superiors. Whatever the case, John told them they didn't have to behave the same way, they could change, and that change could make some positive ripples through their community. Ideally, they would not only help alleviate financial stress for many people by reducing taxes to reasonable amounts, they could help build trust and relationships by getting to know the other people in their community better and learn to recognize them as human beings with strengths, weaknesses, hopes, fears, and challenges, instead of dismissing them as dollar signs. Treating people fairly is a reason to rejoice.

The other group mentioned is soldiers. These were most likely Herod's soldiers and not Roman, which would explain their interest in John's message and could be why they asked him what they should do. John told the soldiers to change the culture that accepted them shaking down civilians for money or even property through threats and acts of violence. Historians wonder if these soldiers were not paid enough, or if they were just greedy or perhaps were bored. Whatever the reason for their behavior, John told them to stop abusing their power and position, and to treat people with dignity instead of bullying them.

The line about being content with wages should not be interpreted as justification for paying people poorly or not giving wage increases to keep up with cost-of-living expenses. Instead, what John was saying is it is unethical and wrong for the soldiers to take out their frustrations on civilians and stealing from them to make ends meet instead of asking for appropriate compensation from their employer. John was challenging the soldiers to change the system by changing how they treat people, and that is a reason to rejoice.

Although all of John's directions were given to individuals asking them to do relatively simple things by sharing what they have, treating people fairly and with respect, they are all changes that reflect God's love in the world. If followed through, those changes could impact larger systems, although the change would be small at first and slow to take hold, depending on how many other people decide to make the same changes. That is still good news, and reason for rejoicing.

John's message is also good news because it was for everyone, even those who might have been characterized as being beyond hope of change or redemption. That means anyone and everyone – from Ebenezer Scrooge to you and me - can, if we choose, change. It might not be easy, it might take time, but it is possible. That can be a powerful message of hope, especially for anyone who feels stuck in an unending cycle or loop. The change can begin the moment a person decides not to perpetuate that cycle. That is good news, and reason for rejoicing.

Of course, we need to remember the changes John is asking us to make are ones that reflect God's kingdom. That means we need to do the work of figuring out what changes need to be made. It means reflecting on the situation we are in, and discerning if we need to work to perpetuate a beloved tradition that still touches people, or adapt that tradition, or if it is time to try something new. It also needs to be said, changes do not always mean past practices, rituals, traditions, or events were bad or wrong. They can still be remembered well and honored, but for a variety of reasons require changes or adaptations.

That is why we need to learn the art of discernment: to learn what changes God is calling us to, to listen for God, to determine if the change reflects God's kingdom, or our own wishes or those of someone else. It is not easy, which is why we need the voices of prophets, resources like our Living Compass daily devotional, and seasons like Advent to help us remember we too can shine the light of God's kingdom into the world by simply sharing what we have, treating people fairly and with respect. And while it is tempting to be pointing fingers at other people and systems we cannot control, messages like those of John the Baptist remind us that change begins with each of us, and that is reason for rejoicing.

We are nearing the end of the season of Advent, but there is still time to reflect on John's message and consider a small, simple, Kingdom of God change you might want to make that will reflect the light of God's kingdom into the world that certainly could use a little light, and that is reason enough to rejoice.