

**"Repentance and Rejoicing"**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan – December 12, 2021**

**Please read:**  
**Philippians 4:4-7**  
**Luke 3:7-18**

After a quick read through the news, whether of the arrest again of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, the rising tensions between the Ukraine and Russia, the continuing threat of the pandemic, the terrible tornadoes that ripped through Kentucky, or the constant gun violence numbers rising in our fair land and the disturbing details around the Oxford High School shootings last week... or more personal bad news of cancer, or loss of a job or relationship, there may be times when we are tempted to believe the world really is coming to an end...

In the face of bad news, maybe we can more easily stomach the strong words of John the Baptist when he interrupts our cozy holiday preparations yelling, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight! You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

I've always been averse to John's approach. *Wrath to come* makes me feel that dread when as a boy I did something bad and mom would send me to my room with the warning, "Your father will deal with you later." *Waiting as fear!* But the older I get, the more I realize the fire described in our texts today is not the fire of damnation or destruction. When John speaks of fire, he is talking about *the fire of redemption and purification*.

The fire here is to burn away any impurities. Luke writes that the "unquenchable fire" to which John compared the coming Messiah is "good news." In other words, the fire here is something that will not destroy us but will make us more the women and men God intends for us to be. Repentance and forgiveness of sins, then, is all about freedom for a new life!

The desired outcome of the coming fire is fruit worthy of repentance... "What then should we do?" That's what all those people were really asking John out there in the region of the Jordan.

We assume we know what the answer will be. After all, this guy just hiked out of the wilderness, and you can still smell that disastrous trail mix of locusts and honey on his breath. He'll probably tell us "Be like me..." Isn't that what all the popular peddlers of prophecy say? Do it my way! or else... Isn't John the Baptist one of those crazy religious zealots who demand that we bind up our lives into tight, mean little balls and pare human life down until it fits the contours of his own eccentric ideology?

You may be surprised to discover that's not what John is about at all. After howling at the crowd, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" he goes on to clarify what worthy fruit might be: If you have extra clothes and food, share them with those who have not. Do your work honestly. Do not give others reason to look upon your work with suspicion, the way people in Galilee looked upon tax collectors and soldiers. Do your work with honesty and integrity and without violence to those whom you serve.

In the simplest, most practical way John the Baptist addresses the inequities of his society and the greed that feeds these inequities. Nothing fancy. Nothing exotic. Nothing strange, really. If you have food and clothing to share, share them. Do your work with integrity, without exploiting

people. It all sounds so perfectly ordinary that it frightens us. Or if it doesn't frighten us, we may dismiss it: Is that all there is to faith?

Mark Labberton is a friend who I quote often as he said of the pastor, "Our job is simply to give a credible witness." Kierkegaard put it this way, "If you take the pastor out of the pulpit, and put him in the marketplace and see how he behaves there, would you still think that he is proclaiming the gospel?" As we all know, actions speak louder than words. The question is, for John, how do your actions line up with God's vision for a better life and a fairer world for all people?

It's important to note that the Gospel according to Luke locates John's ministry in the historical, political, social, and cultural events of the day: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius," and so on. Faith does not begin in some Spiritual never-never land, and it does not begin in some secluded warm and fuzzy corner of our lives. It begins right here in the mix of sacred and secular events, hopeful and horrific, that shapes our lives. Faith begins where we live, or it is no faith at all. "Prepare the way of the Lord," cries John, because God is invading our ordinary human life.

Wouldn't you agree that most people shy away from the Gospel of Jesus because they fear that faith will make them somehow less than fully human? My father-in-law for years would have nothing to do with church because when he was growing up the spirituality, he learned was about what you weren't allowed to do: No drinking, smoking, or girls that do! He was scared that religion would twist and distort life into something strange, and ill-suited for living what he considered at the age of 16 to be a full life.

Another friend, who is currently President of a seminary, grew up with an atheist father. His felt religion narrowed peoples' worlds and minds. And that is often too true in the church. Mark learned not through religion but through reading the Bible that knowing God should expand your world. I believe passionately that the way of Jesus should expand and not shrink your world, should open you up to the mystery and wonder of the complexities of life, should set you free to give to others and be a generative presence in your community, and finally, should bring joy for you and those around you!

However, appealing the Christmas story may be to people, if Jesus' words may ring true, do we dare to follow him? What shall we do is a haunting question, really...? It was interesting to hear some of the thoughts of the most recent Blue Origin astronauts on their experience entering into outer space... Michael Strahan, the former NFL football star turned TV personality, said that it was awesome to move from the light into the darkness, and then again from the darkness into the light. But the second experience of the light has forever changed him...

In this season of Advent anticipation, something within us cries out to respond to God's invitation to move from the superficial lightness of the holidays, to think again about the depths of the Christmas story and the real darkness that we must confront before the One who is the true light can change us forever... Repentance which means (in the Greek) to *change your mind*, requires courage to face our basic fears of surrender... Fred Craddock has it right: there is no one among us who will not raise up on one elbow to ask the surgeon, "But what am I going to be like after the operation?"

Enuma Okoro wrote in her book, *Silence*, “We can be certain of one thing: transformation into God’s image and God’s purpose requires that we pass through God’s refining fire.”<sup>1</sup> The surprising truth is that this fire is God’s love, the only thing that will last forever, the only thing that is unquenchable, that can hold fast to us through the unspeakable tragedies, losses, and disappointments of life. The question is not whether this fire of God’s love is coming to us or not, the question is whether we will receive him when he comes to burn away the chaff in our lives...

The strange paradox of the gospel is that this mysterious path of faith and repentance and bearing worthy fruit... is in fact *the way to our deepest joy*. We are surprised to find that in simply pursuing a credible witness to the self-giving love of Jesus brings us true hope, peace, and joy.

Paul says to his beloved Philippians... “Rejoice again, I say, rejoice!” Paul actually wrote this from a prison cell and with a future that did not look very promising. How could he talk about joy and rejoicing? Paul is closing the letter with final exhortations, and these encouragements and reminders stem from Paul’s certainty in what God is doing to rectify the whole world. He will urge the Philippians to rejoice, twice in verse 4, but in the whole letter there are *sixteen* instances of Paul employing the language of joy or rejoicing.

Joy, for Paul, is not a feeling that is dependent upon circumstances. That’s more about “happiness” that is dependent on the “happenings” around you. Joy, rather, is a deep theological affirmation. It is a choice to reflect on God’s actions to redeem the cosmos even when all the present circumstances might indicate that some other power had won. Joy stems from remembering constantly God’s super-exaltation of Christ after his super-humiliation with death on a treasonous cross. Joy stems from the vision that all the world will recognize the sovereignty of Jesus and his self-giving love when he returns. “The Lord is near,” will always be the basis for our joy because God is sovereign and loves us with an everlasting love.

So, in some ways, the world as we know it is ending. But a new world is just beginning. And now is the time to begin again our Advent repenting and rejoicing. Share what you have. Work honestly and do no harm. Rejoice, and again I will say, rejoice!” Surely, that isn't all there is to faith, but it's a good start! I pray that this day we may repent and believe we are God’s beloved children, and so live to bear fruit worthy of repentance, to both receive and share the gift of God’s joy with all people.

*In the name of the One who is our  
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Joy-Giver! Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Enuma Okoro, *Silence – And Other Surprising Invitations of Advent* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2012), 65.