

Living Faith – Sermon – Advent 3 - 2021 – (Luke 3:7-18)

The theme of this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent is JOY. Yet who shows up but John the Baptist. Who invited him? At our Advent Study on Tuesday, I mentioned that John never seems to appear on any Christmas cards.

“Oh, here’s a Card from John” – he writes, “Merry Christmas – you brood of vipers.” Not likely a big seller.

But the people of Israel were not expecting The Good Humour Man – they saw in John someone authentic – someone like Elijah – a truth teller who did not take fools easily.

And the people, I am sure, reacted like we would – here comes this man in animal skins, a hermit of sorts, a man living in a cave, fasting and praying and waiting on God. We are both excited and just a bit nervous.

It is probable that John was an Essene – a Jewish sect that would have nothing to do with the Temple Cult, who fiercely opposed cooperation with the Romans, who fasted and waited for the Messiah soon to come. It is to them that we owe what became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls – precious remnants of the ancient Scrolls that held the Torah.

People were ready – and John did not disappoint. A fiery message of repentance before the Judgment of the One to come.

Frightening – or was it?

Repentance – a word that has been used to shame and blame – but a word that tells us to do a 180 – turn back from where you are going, turn around to the light of grace, love and purpose.

John speaks of the Messiah to come as fierce and angry – chopping down trees that bear no fruit; separating the wheat from the chaff and burning the latter.

OK John – you’ve got our attention – now what?

1. Baptism – for cleansing and renewing – *when you come out of that water you’re 180 degrees changed from when you went in.*

2. But what of us – the poor, landless, hungry folk?

*If you have a second tunic, give to a person who has none. If you have food share it.*

3. Well what about us, asked the tax collectors with guilt written on their faces?

*Collect what’s owed – no money manager’s commission.*

4. Even soldiers came? Romans – probably not – more the civil guard –  
*- don’t bully, extort, make people carry your loads – be content with your wages.*

Something’s happening here – we were expecting to be dragged through the coals; humiliated; scared out of our wits – doesn’t seem to be that bad.

Well, what about that wheat and chaff – I can guess which I am!

I grew up on a farm and my favourite part of the year was the grain harvest. In those years 3 farming neighbours shared one threshing machine; people put sheaves into stooks; and later wagons laden with sheaves went to the barns to be chewed up in the maw of those noisy beasts. I loved being on the tractor, but as I got older, I sometimes had to shovel grain in the granary – CHAFF – sneezing, coughing, my eyes watering from the stuff.

But it was nothing compared to seeing the beautiful barley filling the bins.

Grain stayed– chaff blew away.

There is a lot of chaff in this world. A lot of things hanging in the air that distract us from what is really necessary for life.

- Electronic chaff clutters our minds – it seems clean enough but after a day on cell phones and internet, we are rather gummed up.
- Christmas is covered in Chaff – we rush to buy things; we see reindeer, and Snowmen, and Trees covered in fake snow; a creature called Santa whose aim is to make us happy; and we hear Christmas Classics full of nostalgia for a time that never was.
- Jesus? Of well, no offence, but he really doesn't sell these days.

If John appeared in Sechelt next week, I suppose his message would not change very much:

- Where are you rushing to? And why?
- Do you need all this stuff?
- You going into debt for those socks?
- What are you giving away? Who are you helping?
- Are you happy?

Good Questions!

In 1990, Linda and I and our 3 children headed off to Lesotho where I was to be chaplain at the national university. Nelson Mandela had been released in South Africa, but Apartheid laws still were in force and Lesotho was often the recipient of refugees from the skirmishes.

It turned out that the University was Catholic and protestant Chaplains were not very busy.

Also, the students were not polite ANC but rather a radical grouping who were not much impressed by this naïve Canadian.

Anyway, violence broke out in the country and our Church leaders in Canada told us to come home.

We went to Langley, a nice Community and good Church but I was detached, on the edge of burnout. I remembered a Catholic sister in Nanaimo whom I had befriended and decided to take a retreat there. She heard my story and told me to go see a person in Vancouver who worked with men in distress. It took me about 2 months to get the courage to go. I remember sitting in my car outside his house wondering if I should even go in. He was probably like John the Baptist

I met this friendly man, full of humour and compassion. He listened to my story and began to teach me how to turn around to the Light. He taught me how to pray – it was not an issue of adding on, but rather taking away the baggage that weighed me down. Not of talking but listening.

The chaff was slowly blown away and Joy appeared.

Paul Theroux: "**Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify!** I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail."

On your thumb nail this week, mark those times in your life that have given you true joy. So often we do not chase it down, rather we turn around and joy comes to greet us.

And John never let the crowds go to his head. He knew his purpose in life – he was not fit to even untie the sandal of the One to come.

Powerful people were afraid of him so they did what they usually do with such people: lock him up, he was a danger to all we hold dear.

JOY - we do not associate John with Joy. But John strips away all pretense, all lame excuses, all that chaff that chokes us, and allows us to see the One who is coming.

And the One who comes, comes not to beat us up – but to show us the way of Joy in simplicity, faith and service to others.

Yes, John was probably a bit disappointed in the way Jesus began his Ministry – so be it – but John knew he must become small so Messiah would become great.

No wonder Jesus was so moved by John's cruel death – John was the one who opened the way that the Joy of God may be revealed.

Joy has come to make its home in our hearts. We can't manufacture it – we can only receive it graciously in faith.