

**“Joy in the Midst of Tough Circumstances”
(Luke 3:7-22)**

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A Strange Juxtaposition

This Gospel reading, in which John the Baptist calls the gathered crowd a “brood of vipers”, comes around every few years a couple of weeks before Christmas. And it always makes me wince. I’m wincing now because it seems like absolutely the wrong reading to go along with the candle of “joy”, which we lit this morning.

The reading that most naturally fits with the candle of joy is the “Magnificat”, the opening words of which make up this morning’s “Call to Worship.” “My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” These are the words of the pregnant Mary, her heart exploding with joy as she anticipates the birth of the child in her womb. The child will be of great consequence; bringing down the mighty and lifting up the lowly, as God has done for her.

But, the readings don’t always line up well with the themes we customarily assign to our Advent candles. And so John the Baptist’s harsh criticism and stern call to repentance stands side by side with the candle of joy in this morning’s worship in a seemingly unlikely

partnership. And this raises the question, “What, if anything, do John’s harsh words have to do with the joy we feel at Christ’s coming?”

One Tough Reading

If your first response to the words of John the Baptist is like mine, you may be wondering whether you yourself have just been harangued, berated or accused. And I do think that is the intended effect. When someone talks to the “crowd” in the Gospels, that is a pretty good tip that scripture is pointing a finger at us.

And it becomes more clear that John’s words are also for us, when he says to the crowd, “Don’t say that you have Abraham as your ancestor *(as though that will save you)*” “The axe is lying at the root and every tree that fails to bear fruit will be cut down”.

Well, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, we have been grafted onto the Biblical family tree, and so those who claim Abraham as an ancestor includes us. So, we’ve been fingered. And John is essentially telling us that, identifying ourselves as “Christians” won’t save us. (Labels mean nothing to John). What will save us is the bearing of good fruit.

And if all this weren't enough to make John the "killjoy" on this Sunday dedicated to the candle of "joy," he throws in a harrowing description of the winnowing process by which wheat is separated from chaff, and the chaff thrown into the fire. So that, all in all, this Gospel reading seems better designed to leave us biting our fingernails off out of the fear of roasting in hell.

And yet, I do believe that once the shock of being brow-beaten by John has worn off, this passage actually does a good job of pointing us to a cause for joy to be found in this season.

Happiness and Joy

One of the things, I find so unfortunate about church attendance these days is that so many of the folks who were once deeply engaged with the faith, now only attend on Christmas or on other high holy days, if they attend at all. And what is unfortunate about it is that all they are prompted to reflect on at these occasions is the happy beginnings and the happy endings.

As important or inspiring as these high holy days may be, they do not stand on their own. The depth of meaning that they draw on is rooted in the daily moral and spiritual struggles that believers go through, as

they attempt to conform to the example set by Jesus. In other words, the high holy days are the high points in a life of discipleship. So that, for those who practice their faith on a daily and weekly basis, Christmas and Easter are not just happy events. They involve a deeper experience of joy.

Happiness is, I think, a pale emotion in comparison with joy. It comes and goes, because it is a surface experience. But joy is something much deeper and much more powerful. Joy has depth, in part, because it comes at a cost. It is the fruit of a battle we engage in within ourselves to do and be something that is worthy of the gift of life that has been given to us.

The battle we are to undertake involves the experience of being purified or sanctified by our faithfulness to a Spirit of eternal and matchless beauty that is being revealed to and shared with our hearts. As Paul says, "I must decrease, so that he may increase." And the increase of this beauty in our heart brings us joy. I think that is what this passage is really about.

Sanctification

In the Gospel reading, John gives us a description of this battle we must engage in as we await our Savior's birth, and in some ways it is a very simple instruction to engage in a self-discipline that is available to us all.

He tells the crowd that "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Tax collectors are to collect no more than the amount prescribed. And soldiers are not to extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and are to be satisfied with their wages.

In other words, according to John the Baptist, bearing good fruit means first of all looking out to make sure everyone is taken care of. And then it means doing your job the way it is supposed to be done and avoiding any temptation to use our occupations dishonestly. John calls us to be morally self-disciplined.

We know that, from the top to the bottom of our economy, in every niche, there are temptations to dishonesty. If you are wealthy, you are very likely to get away with tax evasion if that is what you choose to do. Because we all know that by and large the IRS doesn't have the staff to prosecute much more than the simplest forms of tax evasion.

In the middle and bottom of the social ladder there is the temptation to sit at one's desk and stall and do as little as is necessary to draw a paycheck, or there is the possible of feigning disability in order to draw welfare checks.

I don't want to point a finger unfairly in any direction, because every person's situation is different. But suffice to say, the challenge to lead our lives with integrity and honesty involves self-discipline and a commitment to doing the right thing, even when it means we pay a price for it. We have to have the strength to be morally upright, even when the dishonest see us as suckers and happily walk away with more of the pie.

But the amazing thing is that, it is a good kind of paying a price! It dawns on us that there is a secret joy that enters into us when we persist in doing the good from which we ourselves draw no visible personal benefit. When in faith we do what is right, we begin to feel the truth that we are not children of God in name only, but in a much deeper sense, that in fact, the greater treasure is ours.

The Winnowing

There is a subtle misunderstanding that I carried with me as I read this morning's passage in the past. And I think is worth pointing out here. In the past, I thought, when John the Baptist was talking about separating the wheat from the chaff, that he was talking about separating good people from bad people and throwing the bad people into the fire. And because I thought this was what the passage meant, I found it to be too harsh and anxiety producing; the kind of passage that extremists might use to threaten people into believing in Jesus.

But on closer reading, that is not what the passage says at all. Each grain has it's own wrapping of chaff, and so the chaff here has to be understood, not as bad people, but as the unnecessary part of every person that covers up or obscures the pure and nutritious grain that is potential within us.

The threshing floor must therefore be life. And the threshing we experience, is all the suffering and deceit that we endure when we are faithful to what is good and right in accordance with our faith in Jesus, who himself was threshed with a whip and nailed to a cross because he would not betray the truth of God.

And if we conduct our lives honestly, avoiding every temptation to cheat, as John the Baptist urges us to do, we will suffer too. But that suffering will not be in vain. Instead, it will thresh away the useless chaff that covers us and leave behind only the polished and nutritious grain, so that all there is left of us is all that is essential and best.

God's Treasure

I'd like to end by staying on the same subject, but shifting to a different metaphor. Just as we are like grains of wheat from which the chaff must be removed, we are like coins in God's treasure chest, that must be polished.

God polishes us with a cloth to make us shine. But the cloth God uses can't be too soft, otherwise it will only run over the surface and leave a layer of grime. So, the cloth God uses to clean us has to be somewhat abrasive. And it is true that the events that God sends our way in life can be very hard, and so there is a suffering we endure that is part of the polishing.

Another thing that is necessary for the polishing to be successful, is for the coin to be pressed into the cloth. And perhaps we can think of that finger pushing the coin into the cloth, as the faith which God puts in our

hearts that compels us to go out into the world and engage it positively, even when it makes us suffer to do so. If we “flee from the wrath to come” we will remain dull and unpolished coins.

But if we refuse to run, but stay disciplined in fulfilling our roles with honesty and faith, the suffering we endure will only be part of the polishing by which God shines us and prepares us for our place among the other coins in his treasure chest.

I do not wish to speak glibly about suffering, because I do not consider myself to be a person who has experienced great hardship. But the extent to which I have experienced this, it seems to me that this vision rings true. And that is cause for joy. In some ways, I think that John the Baptist’s harsh message and the candle of joy are not such an odd couple; that they do belong together after all.