

Hebrew Testament Reading: *Isaiah 35:1-10*
Gospel Readings: *Matthew 11:2-11, Luke 1:46b-55*

word count: 1,741

The two main ideas that come up in today’s service are “joy” and “doubt.” Joy is the name for the third candle in our advent wreath, and it describes the feeling of anticipation as we come closer to the observance of Christmas and all that the season means to us.

The theme of “joy” is what is mirrored in the words of the Magnificat, the song Mary sings about the meaning of the child she is carrying. Her words echo the song of Hannah, found in 1 Samuel 2, where Hannah sings of her joy at finding that she will give birth in later age, a child that she will deliver to the temple at Shiloh to become the great priest Samuel. It is a song people knew, and early followers of Jesus changed the words to reflect the joy of Mary. Luke takes this song, and plunks it into the beginning of his gospel. We more or less sang the words to Mary’s song (as well as some of Hannah’s) just now in the hymn, “My Soul Gives Glory to My God.”

And then, there is “doubt.” Doubt is the feeling expressed by John the Baptist, as the lectionary jumps us ahead to a correspondence between Jesus and John where John begins to express some doubts about who Jesus really is.

Joy and doubt.

People have pursued joy in every avenue imaginable. Some have successfully found it while others have not. Perhaps it would be easier to describe where joy cannot be found:

Not in Pleasure—Lord Byron lived a life of pleasure if anyone did. He wrote: “The worm, the canker, and grief are mine alone.”

Not in Money—Jay Gould, the American millionaire, had plenty of that. When dying, he said: “I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth.”

Not in Position and Fame—Lord Beaconsfield enjoyed more than his share of both. He wrote: “Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret.”

Not in Military Glory—Alexander the Great conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent, before he said, “There are no more worlds to conquer.”¹

Where then is real joy found?

First, let me turn back to doubt.

In the vernacular of the church, doubt is a negative word. It is rarely used in a favorable way. Faith, not doubt, is the great word of the church. As I stand here every Sunday morning and look into your faces, so softly tilted up towards the light, you look so content, so full of faith, so free of doubt, so ready for the coffee hour.

But, I have a suspicion that the way you look is not the way you are. Beneath your surface there may be seeds of honest doubt. Some of you don’t share these feelings, but your doubts are there and they are real. Others do share their questions at bible-study (on Tuesday evenings at 6:30 in Plumer Hall, drop in any time, you don’t need to bring anything) and we wrestle with scripture and with doubt. In facing this situation, all of us at times cry out with the man in the Gospel, “God, I believe; help thou my unbelief.” This capacity to doubt can often lead to some of life’s most profound questions.

Such was the case with John the Baptist. His question —“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” did not grow out of his uncertainty, but out of his doubt. John the Baptist had heard about the words and deeds of Jesus, but what he had heard did not square with the expectations Isaiah foretold.

Scholar and writer Joe Pennel theorizes that, after all, Jesus was born not to royalty, but almost out-of-wedlock in a very difficult situation. He didn't function as the military ruler that was expected, but as a servant. He wasn't a judge, but one who forgave. He did not come "with vengeance and terrible recompense"; he brought a message of love as something divine. He did not aspire to the religious establishment, but he went from village to village associating with the rubbish heap of humanity. He spent his time and energy with the least and the lost. He was most concerned with the powerless: the blind and the lame, the lepers and the deaf, and the poor and the outcast. And Jesus dared to teach that the weak and the meek occupied the most important place in the realm of God.

John the Baptist became confused about the way in which Jesus acted out what was expected of a new and redeeming force. He had doubts about the validity of his contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth. His skepticism caused him to send one of his friends to Jesus with the question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Like others in the New Testament, John the Baptist was not positive.

That John the Baptist had doubts about who Jesus was supposed to represent is revealed in his question: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" His question is not clear, either in what is being asked or why. But like all good questions, it shoves the reader into deeper regions of thought.²

Some scholars have even suggested that John the Baptist was co-opted and placed into the Gospels. John, like Jesus, was an itinerant teacher and healer who had a message and a following. The followers of John were strong and many and stories of them were remembered by later Christians. It has been suggested that John and his disciples were placed in the gospels as if to say, "See, even the great preacher John was sent to herald the way for someone greater than him, our own Jesus."

But, like John, we are confused about the mixed metaphors about Jesus. A king of glory who washes the feet of his disciples, the master who teaches by example to be a servant, a messiah figure who was sent to save, but who dies an ignominious death instead. Finally, the teacher of the most disarmingly simple phrase that confuses and confounds us more in these last few months than at any other time: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

For all of the honest doubt you may share with John the Baptist in assessing who Jesus of Nazareth is and what he means to you, the message of hope, peace, joy and love that are embodied in the Advent season, if we really examine their meaning, should work to remove some of those doubts as we feel how the message of the season works upon us.

I haven't heard a word this year about the ongoing "War on Christmas." Perhaps there was some decisive skirmish round about last Easter that ended it, and no one has bothered to tell me the outcome. I do hope Christmas won. However, I did read somewhere in the ongoing battles over public displays of Christmas decorations, that someone also complained that the words to Christmas songs were "distressingly theological."

Well, after all, Christmas is a rather theological affair, isn't it? When a baby born in a stable in a place called Bethlehem, thousands of miles from the United States, causes traffic jams in cities all over the country twenty centuries later, almost anyone could deduce that the baby had particular meaning for the world, even if that meaning has been trivialized. Doubt can turn to joy, and the effects of it are felt in places like this around the world once we begin to live the message, slowly and over time.

There was a fascinating study on the principle of the Golden Rule that was conducted by Bernard Rimland, director of the *Institute for Child Behavior Research*. Rimland found that "The happiest people are those who help others."

Each person involved in the study was asked to list ten people they knew best and to label them as happy or not happy. Then they were to go through the list again and label each one as selfish or unselfish, using the following definition of selfishness: “a stable tendency to devote one’s time and resources to one’s own interests and welfare—an unwillingness to inconvenience one’s self for others.”³

In categorizing the results, Rimland found that all of the people labeled happy were also labeled unselfish. He wrote that those “whose activities are devoted to bringing themselves happiness...are far less likely to be happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making others happy.”

Rimland concluded: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”⁴

Disarmingly simple, and pronounced by one about whom there have been perhaps more doubts than any other, including his own first cousin, John the Baptist, the message about finding joy cuts through the doubts if we will let it.

George Bernard Shaw, a nasty curmudgeon and not the best example I could find of someone who found and spread joy wherever he went, wrote about taking your every faculty and devoting it to a true purpose that you find the most meaningful and finding joy therein. If the golden rule and the commandment to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself holds meaning for you in a season that heralds the birth of the Christ child, then listen to Shaw’s unpastoral but truthful words:

“*This is the true joy in life; the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap, and being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.*”⁵

This is the season of joy, and joy is found when it is given to others. Mary’s joy was the source of this joy given to the world. Joy to you and to those whose happiness this season is in doing unto others has you would have them do unto you, in the name of the one who brought us great truth, and whose birth we prepare to celebrate. AMEN

Sermon Resources

- 1) The Bible Friend, *Turning Point*, May, 1993.
- 2) Joe E. Pennel Jr., (adapted) *From Anticipation to Transfiguration*, CSS Pub., 1989, 23-24.
- 3) Rimland, *The Altruism Paradox*, Psychological Reports 51, 1982, 521.
- 4) Ibid, p. 522.
- 5) George Bernard Shaw quoted in: Jon Johnston, *Courage - You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear*, SP Publications, 1990, p. 171. Here is the rest of the quote:

“I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's sort of a splendid torch which I have got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

Scripture for Sunday, December 16, 2007 Advent 3A

Isaiah 35: 1 - 10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Luke 1: 46b - 55

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

GOSPEL: Matthew 11: 2 - 11 (all)

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.