

Bearing Fruit That's Worthy

Ezekiel 17: 22-24 Luke 3: 7-18

On this third Sunday of Advent, we light the candle representing joy, joy in the coming of the Promised One who will fulfill God's will for creation. But last week's candle representing peace doesn't simply happen, but emerges from a dedicated pursuit of God's path amid the darkness and the violence, following the light of God's messenger into the paths of peace. In the same way, today's scriptures temper the ascription of joy with the reminder from the messenger of God that joy can only come amid the fruits of repentance.

Joy itself is one of those words or concepts that we know when we've got it and we know when it's absent, and we may even appreciate how rare and exquisite it is. Joy isn't simply being happy, pleased, or content, although it is seen as a similar expression for those states of being. Joy isn't something that you simply into as you step out of bed to greet a new day.

Joy is produced, generated in something great and mighty, overshadowing self and its pettiness with what is unmistakably glorious, inspired, and exceptional. We have smiles of happiness, but not smiles of joy. We have *tears* of joy. We may laugh and cheer in our happiness, but we *shout* for joy. Joy is something very special. Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw wrestles to understand it this way:

*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; **the 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.*

Joy stands apart, but there is no necessity for it, and it should never be imagined as effortless. Joy may come in grace, in a way that's unbidden, surprising, awakening. Joy may also come through the trials of faith, a product of struggle, sacrifice, on the other side of despair, the fulfillment of hope.

This state of elation is notably absent from the account in Luke about John the Baptist and the account of him preparing the way. Last week we heard how John was regarded at his birth as the messenger, the forerunner of the promised coming of the Messiah from God. John is the Elijah figure who prepared the way for the Lord.

Like many of his predecessors to the prophetic office, John, um ... lacked tact. Of course, tact wasn't his job; dishing out God's truth in unequivocal terms was his job.

John is out in the middle of nowhere, baptizing those who came to him, seeking to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah. To show that John knew nothing about salesmanship, he welcomes this crowd of seekers with a line ensuring that he'll never

have a mega-church: *You pile of poisonous snakes! What's the matter; feel the heat of the coming wrath warming your backsides!* Nice going, John, you crowd-pleaser.

Then he drops the subject line of today's sermon: *Bear fruits worthy of repentance.* In other words, 'if you think you're going to slither past the judgment of God by babbling a meaningless petition and taking a dip in the baptismal waters, think again!'

What John presents to them sounds perfectly reasonable to **our** ears; repentance means changing your ways and living toward the righteousness of God. Acknowledge wrongful past deeds as well as change your heart, spirit, and action going forward. This sets oneself right with God, and stays that way.

Yet this sounded rather odd and perhaps a bit illegitimate. You see, the traditional way for Jews to get right with God was to offer the proper sacrifices in the Temple as required by the Temple priest. John was saying that the usual Temple offering wasn't going to cut it in God's coming new age. You can imagine what they said: *I don't know... we've never done it that way before. It doesn't seem right.*

So that no one would mistake his point, he spoke specifically to the Jews who were in the middle of doing a **group shrug** and thinking, *Am I child of Abraham or what? Whatsa matter here? This guy is meshugana.* These are comments that I made up and are not found in scripture, but listen to what John says, and you'll see why we can assume them saying something like that.

John says to the Jews: *Don't be saying to yourselves, 'Oh, we don't have to worry; we're covered because we're children of Abraham.' That isn't going to pass in the coming age. God can make such as you rise up from a dead pile of stones. Don't think you can dodge this; the ax is aligned to the root of the tree and is about to strike.*

What should we do? they ask. If making an offering at the Temple, and being children of Abraham isn't good enough, well, what is? John does not provide the counsel or instruction that they'd typically receive from a priest or a rabbi. Yet, John's counsel could be found in many of the biblical prophets, and indeed in the Torah itself. John speaks about sincerely and consistently caring and sharing, hallmark values of God and his coming Kingdom. *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do the same.*

The Jews in the crowd are aghast. The problem is not just the giving; that's bad enough. It's also the contact. Attractive, nice, good people might have to prolong an encounter with the ugly, bad, poor people. They're unclean. What are gated communities for, anyway?

Tax collectors knew how despised and sinful they were. They figured some extra special offering could be presented at the Temple. John tells them: *Don't collect any more than you're required.* This takes them aback. That's crazy; this guy really is *meshugana*.

Before, the tax collector could always bring in an unblemished fatted calf as an offering along with some other goodies – that’s a pretty nice offering. John doesn’t give them that nice and easy option. John wants them to conduct *their business* differently. Woah! This religious stuff just got in my wallet. Being good and faithful never meant adopting “business ethics.” Business was business, and religion was religion. This guy John has got this all mixed up and wants us to change. **Change?** Change how I do business? Is he serious?

Then some soldiers, who are likely not Jews, ask him a question. Meanwhile those first Jews are first thinking, *Ew, tax collectors*. With this group now speaking up, it’s: *Oh. My. Heavens. Roman soldiers? Gentiles? What’s next, lepers and Samaritans?*

The soldiers ask, ‘what must **they** do?’ John replies, *Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages*. The soldier who has dreams of that seaside villa in Ephesus, zipping around in the golf cart, shuffleboard, scrapbooking, clog dancing, complaining about young people, that whole dream goes poof. There is no way a soldier can pay the membership fee without regularly shaking down the oppressed and exploited; that’s the way business gets done. Live on the wages? No one joins the Roman army because of the great pay. It’s the extortion, shakedowns, and pillaging, **that’s** what makes it all worthwhile. That’s like giving up all the incentives.

John’s message to all of them is not simply to make an affirmation of faith, assent to a bunch of traditional statements, make an offering, and observe the holy days. John demands **true** repentance, a conclusive and drastic change of heart and practice. The old ways are about to be eclipsed by something far greater. Those old traditional paths had become remote and removed from the purposes of the God of their worship.

It was like the *tradition* over the years had redefined *God* and faith and righteousness. Tradition changed them into what it wanted, into terms that were useless, meaningless, even innocuous. These terms and concepts meant nothing and did nothing, but they were required, serving the religion, but not God.

John insisted that the way of faith in the coming Kingdom was about caring and sharing, about building up human community. This was the fruit of true repentance. It meant standing for justice for *all* in the community, and taking one’s place alongside sisters and brothers in common cause, not exploiting the other, but resisting and reforming the injustice that had become so accepted, widespread, even systemic.

Contrary to traditional preach and practice in their time, just as in ours, the fruit of repentance and faithful dedication were not about gaining personal righteousness for oneself. It was not about getting *yourself* saved and making *yourself* righteous. John shifts the focus away from oneself and aligns it with more just, positive, and ethical encounters with *all* sisters and brothers. John is attempting to describe a society that has repented, a community that bears fruit worthy of true repentance.

Yes, it's an ideal, but it's descriptive of the promise of the Kingdom of God. With a new age at hand, John prepares the way by breaking the rules and, preaching in their stead, a change of heart and spirit. Yes, it's for individuals, but with each one contributing to benefit the whole community of faithful. The community that values its diverse people, practices compassion, and reflects grace and mercy is the goal. Then the fruit worthy of repentance is undoubted; you can see it and feel it everywhere.

The promise of God in Ezekiel 17 describes a new creation. The Lord God takes a sprig from atop a cedar and transplants it on "a high and lofty mountain," clearly the sacred mount of Jerusalem. God says, "I will plant it, in order that it may grow and produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble (or worthy) cedar."

One problem: cedars don't bear any fruit. So, clearly we're talking about more than simple trees in this oracle. Given the location of the planting atop Jerusalem, this new tree represents a new covenant with God's people, a new nation, or a new society of God's people.

This cedar will bear "fruit," it says. Then we find out what that "fruit" is, what will be appearing on its branches: *Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.* The population that dwells in the safety and security of the branches of this tree will be of *every kind*, and *all* will find shelter and shade in that tree of God's planting.

We see that fruits of repentance, the worthy fruits, those which are sacred and divinely inspired, provide for the security of all, not just the few, not just the many. In God's view, there must be room for all people, and there must be security for all people. Security doesn't simply mean the absence of threats, but the well-being of all people. This describes a society where justice is upheld, peace is cherished and pursued, the weak, poor, and outcast are all given their good and proper home.

Flipping back to the end of that passage in Luke, at the end, after John has talked about the Messiah who comes with his winnowing fork and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire, it ends saying: *John proclaimed the good news to the people.*

The good news is that God's promise will be fulfilled, and the day of joy will come to all of God's people. By God's command, the worthy tree will bear its fruit, holding all of God's people safe and secure, cared for and at home. With God's coming, we will sing for joy. May we also be committed together to bearing fruits worthy of repentance, the change of heart and spirit that prepares the way.