

This week I went for a run. I love running and I feel so alive after my daily runs. But I had not slept well and I was so slow. I even had to walk. As many of you know, when a child is learning a new task, the parents often do not slip. Then I started thinking about all my mistakes. So I Decided to have a party. Not the fun kind, I started having a pity party. This idea that Paul wrote of in today's reading, "Rejoicing in the Lord and letting my gentleness be known." That was out of the question!

Then, I began to pray. I remembered the Gospel for this week and John the Baptist's call to action. He says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."¹ Ouch. These words challenged me to repent rather than wallow in my sins. I had to take ownership and think of how I could change my ways.

I remembered that John the Baptist's words about repentance began with acknowledging your sins then to stop doing them. So, I began to repent: Lord, I have been scattered and distracted; help me to focus. Lord, I have been impatient, give me patience.

Next I began to listen to God in earnest, which changed my perspective. Today's gospel calls us to this type of accountability and change in perspective.

John uses strong language which may sound harsh to our modern ears. John is looking at the world around him and saying, "this does not fit what God is calling us to or be." Specifically, people such as Herod are being criticized. Herod was sort of a prince of the Jews² and was feeding into the same oppression as many of those coming to be baptized. John is not telling people to quit their jobs; he is telling them to be honest. John is blunt. For those wanting to be baptized, they must change their ways. They need to act morally regardless of the circumstances.

Those who want to follow this New Way, this way of Christ must give up the blame game and stop making themselves a victim.³ Look at the soldiers to which John speaks, they regularly extorted people. John says they need to stop it right away. John is calling people to live against the ways of the world.

Friends, this is a hard call. It is unpopular. It means sharing what we have and resisting the temptation of being overly ambitious.

Directly following John the Baptist's call he tells them, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."⁴ We need this Holy spirit and fire now to experience both joy.

It energizes us.

It gives us clarity.

It allows us to repent and rejoice.

While fire is dangerous it can also cleanse. A forest fire can clear out the old to make way for the new.

The same is also true of judgment.

There is a connection between judgment and joy. Think of the word judgment as righteousness. Judgment is a way to see things clearly. Accepting Christ's judgment allows us to repent and rejoice more freely.

¹ Luke 3:8

² Wright.

³ Wright, N.T. (2001). *Luke for Everyone*. London: SPCK. pp.30-34

⁴ Luke 3:16

This type of Judgement is what the prophets call us to see. The prophets who Jesus, John, and St. Paul quoted did not look at joy as “being happy.”

When Paul, Luke wrote, and the Prophets wrote, they did so in times of pain and uncertainty. Remember, Paul often wrote his letter from a jail cell. I imagine he had moments of great sorrow in a first century jail where the amenities would be described as less than adequate. It was a time of pain. Today's command to rejoice sits with our repentance, our admission that we need to change our ways.

God's joy does not exclude or deny the ability to experience hardship.⁵ Perhaps to experience the joy to which Paul calls us we must look at joy as a bridge. Joy goes around sentimentality and cynicism while holding sin and God's love in balance.

Joy bridges the space that can be felt between these so that we may fully embrace the salvific nature of our coming Lord and Savior.

When we understand that the world in which John is speaking craves the ability to see things clearly, we can recognize that it is in fact, a call to joy. They cannot truly be joyful until they have repented and been baptized with the Holy Spirit into new life.

Pain is real. At this time of year, particularly for those who have lost a loved one, the Christmas festivities can feel overwhelming. The church has responded to this need with a pastoral calling. We have created Blue Christmas services.

It is also worth noting that much of our Christian history does not include lavish celebrations of Christmastide. If this year, the pandemic, the loss of a loved one, or something else has you in a more reflective mood, I think these lessons and this time of year are fit for you as well.

Advent is a time of reflection. It is a time of repentance. In advent, we are called to take a measure of our life. This naturally happens in times of grief and loss. As we grieve, joy is the bridge that leads to God's love. It is not ignoring God's love rather it is embracing the whole of the word in the way Paul did in a prison two thousand years ago.

We are awaiting the coming of Christ now and remembering the ways in which those at Jesus' time anticipated his coming. Look at the crowds surrounding John. He was calling them to confess. The prayer of confession states, that we have “sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, we have not loved with our whole hearts.”

Think about that for a moment.

When Paul exhorts us to rejoice, he is asking us to be joyful in spite of the pain and sins. John calls us to come closer to God through repentance. The better we are able to give up our way of sins the closer we are able to draw to Christ. Those around John acknowledge that something is missing in their life.⁶ He tells them to look at their neighbor. This is exactly what we do when we acknowledge that we have not “loved our neighbor as ourselves.”⁷

We have an advantage to those crowds: we know that there is grace and forgiveness because for us, each Sunday we are reminded that Christ came and forgave us. The response to this, as Christians, is to keep living with integrity.

To not be vipers.

⁵ Thomas, Debbie (2021). Rejoice Always? *Journey with Jesus*. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3246>

⁶ Much in this section was inspired by West, Audrey. (2021). Commentary on Luke 3:7-18. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18-5>

⁷ Book of Common Prayer (1979). p.352

But to be messengers of God's love in the world.

To repent and rejoice.

So, what should we do? We can pray and reflect on our lives.

Then we can examine how to take ownership of our sins and change our ways.

Much like me on that difficult run, you may be tempted to throw a pity party. But healing is found in examining your heart and seeking to change our lives for the better. Of course, many of us are our worst critics. We must remember to love ourselves, in addition to God and our neighbor.

When we do this difficult work of repentance, then our hearts and lives are more fully relying upon God. That is a reason to rejoice, because God is with us.

We rejoice because God loves us.

We rejoice because God loves our neighbor.

As Paul wrote from a prison cell, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice."

Amen.