

Joy at Arm's Length

Luke 3:7-18

This morning we celebrate the lighting of the Advent candle of Joy; always recognizable as the pink candle in the Advent wreath. Like Hope and Peace—the themes of the first two Sundays of Advent—Joy resonates deeply with us. Perhaps more than ever during this pandemic. We have felt the frustration of experiences that brought us joy in the past, being unavailable to us now. Including the joy of sharing Christmas with friends and family.

Meanwhile, on the timeline of the Advent wreath, that pink candle reminds us that we have turned the corner and are officially in the home stretch to Christmas. And there to greet is an old bearded friend. No, not jolly old St. Nick with his belly shaking like a bowl full of jelly with every burst of merry “Ho-ho-hos”. But the gaunt and scraggly-bearded figure of John the Baptist, hurling epithets like, “You brood of vipers.” John comes across more as the bearer of lumps of coal and warnings that “He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so you’d better be good, for goodness’ sake” than gaily wrapped gifts and Yuletide greetings.

Whoever decided that John the Baptist with his off-putting style, was a good fit to be the spokesperson for the Sunday of Advent associated with joy?! Lots of people, I guess. Because crowds thronged to hear what he had to say. Luke himself claims that despite the lack of finesse in John’s delivery, his message was nonetheless received as “good news” by the people. John’s message about repentance and “God knowing if you’ve been bad or good,” was like the tag on a gift under the Christmas tree that has your name on it, no matter who you are. It was an invitation to unwrap and claim the gift of God’s love for you and God’s willingness to forgive everything and anything that you have put between you and God. The repentance to which John called people was not motivated by a fear of God’s anger, but an invitation to share in the joy of God’s unconditional love.

There are times and circumstances though, that make us feel only the absence of joy; and foster doubt, or at least cause us to question, where God is in that reality. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem that became one of my favorite Christmas Carols (which we will sing shortly). Longfellow’s beloved wife Fannie had tragically died after her dress caught on fire. He tried to extinguish the flames as best he could, first with a rug and then his own body, but she had already been burned so severely that she died the next day. Longfellow’s own burns were enough to prevent him from attending her funeral.

For the rest of his life, he wore a beard to hide the burns to his own face, suffered in his attempts to save Fannie. But he could not hide his grief, which was so intense that he feared that he it would be the cause of him being sent to an asylum. Then, early in the Advent of 1863, Longfellow received a telegram notifying him that his son had been seriously wounded while serving in the Union Army.

On Christmas Day of that year, Longfellow wrote a poem to express the dissonance between the joyful celebrations of Christmas around him, and the deep despair within his soul. Despair for both his personal tragedies and the tragedy of Civil War that was the cause of so much misery for so many families. You may also hear a warning that joy can be hollow and unproductive if it becomes a diversion from the hard realities that God calls us to name and confront.

These are the first verses of the poem he wrote:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Sometimes, especially in tough times when the bad news is relentless, it's like we keep joy at arm's length. As if Joy was an unreliable friend who will ultimately disappoint us if we allow ourselves to be charmed into a false sense of security and comfort. Other times, we keep Joy as close at hand as a sedative on the nightstand to help us prevent troubles—our personal troubles and the world's troubles—from keeping us up and anxious at night.

If the poem ended on that dark and somber note, it would be an ode to *joylessness*; mocking the songs of faith and hope in God and in God's steadfast love for us. But there is one more verse:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail,

With peace on earth, good-will to men."

John's good news was not just a gift *to* the crowds who came out to hear him. It is good news *to* us in these times of disease and division. It would also be good news *through* them and through us, to others. Those who found joy in possessing more than they needed would discover joy instead by lessening the needs of others through acts of generosity. For tax collectors and soldiers—two occupations that at that time were conspicuous for their tendency towards corruption and abuses of power—the joy they seized by bullying and cheating others could be translated into creating joy for others by treating them fairly and compassionately.

Genuine joy is not a product of good fortune and success. Nor is joy a diversion to distract our attention from facing the tough challenges that lie before us. As we draw near to the end of our Advent preparations for Christmas, may the light of the candle of Joy illuminate for us the true nature of joy, not as denial nor despair, but as the joyous good news made visible in Jesus.

The Joy of God with us.

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