

A Home For All
Luke 3:1-18, Zephaniah 3:14-20
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
The Third Sunday of Advent (Love)
Woodbury UMC
December 12, 2021

I've got the joy joy joy joy down in my heart—where? (*Everyone sings back*)

That was fun, right? I'm guessing you are all a little amused by that, not sure if a little amused counts as joy OR happiness. But this is the Joy week, we finally light that pink, rose colored candle, and this week we focus on joy. We have an Old Testament scripture telling of return for the exiles, of an end to tears—that sounds like something to make you joyful! And then we get to the New Testament, and John saying You brood of vipers! You snakes! This is indeed the lectionary text for this week, and yet it we are to reflect on joy with this. So much anger! How does that convey any joy? Why is this the scripture for the Joy week?

We are nearly halfway through our Close to Home series. Our first week, we considered what it meant to be homesick for the place where you truly belong. Last week, we considered the strong foundation needed for a home to be safe and reliable. This week, the subject is A Home For All.

Garrett did a good job of reading the scripture, but the thing is, the Bible doesn't tell you the tone of voice of a person, you need to figure that out for yourself. How do you hear John's tone here? As this hairy man in the wilderness is calling people vipers, saying how dare you try to escape the coming wrath. I think it is hard to hear it starting off as anything BUT angry—and John is angry at the people who have gone to some trouble to come to him, to see him, to receive from him. These aren't the people avoiding God!

What's interesting about this selection is that for the Close to Home series, we have combined two readings that the revised common lectionary spreads across two weeks, giving us the first 6 lines:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.

That is hard to read, but it is really important, and here is why. You remember that this story takes place 30 years after the birth of Jesus, 30 years after the events of the nativity. Herod the Great is the monster of a man who ruled at that time. We are now 30 years later, and Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—three brothers all ruling over parts of the land, the scripture writer is nailing down this story in time, true, but he is also telling us that the kingdom of Herod has splintered, and that his three sons have now split the realm into three, each ruling their own piece of it.

This is a sign for us readers that all is not well, that things have splintered politically since we last checked in. If I tell you that a baby is born during the Trump presidency, or the Obama presidency, and then we check back in on him 30 years later and I tell you that now it is the time when one person is president of the northeast, another is president of the Mid-Atlantic, and another is president of the southern gulf, you know that something significant has happened, and that all is not well in the land. THAT is where we meet up with John the Baptizer, and that is where we are looking for a messiah that will restore the

kingdom. We know that people wanted someone to kick out the Romans, they hated the Roman, but the degree to which things had come apart, well, things are a lot worse than you might have realized.

And into that world comes John, both of high society and the priesthood, and now he too is doing God's work by the Jordan, calling people to repentance. He's in the family business, I'd say, but his father and mother may have seen it differently, him hairy, by the water, eating locusts—they might have said this is NOT the same thing as what we do. God called John for a specific place and time (v. 1-4), and this is, a message of joy, especially for those who had lost hope, hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious authorities against them. Why? Because John is doing something really different. And if you are there listening to John, you know that the world as they know it is about to change.

This happens from time to time. I had a hard time coming up with a good example of this for you, but perhaps it is like generational shifts in music, where every so often something comes along where the previous generation says this doesn't even count as music, this is just noise, but the next generation after that embraces it. This happens in film, in all manner of art, where the way things had been done changes so drastically that the practitioners of the prior way hardly recognize the next stage as being related to their work. Sometimes I wonder if we might be seeing that in the church in our own time.

There's more. John doesn't say "Do you know who I am?" John doesn't intend to be trading on his father's good name, and that's part of his message when he says "Don't tell me that you are children of Abraham"—because remember, that would mean that they are already the chosen people, so these people are already good with God, just by their birth. John is saying, that's not how it works. You and you and you must bear fruit worthy of repentance" (v. 8), not relying on past glories, heritage, or lineage, but producing their own fruit, living and acting in ways that demonstrated true change. The crowds didn't know what to make of that. That was new.

John offers words of wisdom. When I asked about his tone, this was the part that really got to me. Because he starts off, to me, sounding terribly angry, fire and brimstone stuff. And then someone says What are we supposed to do? And he says If you have two shirts, give one away. If you have plenty of food, share it. It feels like he goes from this fiery, half-crazed looking person, to a very reasonable, sensible teacher in a very short period of time, that sometimes loses his temper. And that is where it gets really uncomfortable. You know you are reading old stories, meant for ancient readers, and so we read about John talking to tax collectors, we hate them, and when the soldiers come, we REALLY hate them, and we chuckle a little bit, because we know that these people were not welcome where Hebrews gathered, and especially where Hebrews gather for worship, repentance, and dedicating themselves to God. Tell them, John! Set them straight, we cheer!

And then we realize that the is also Holy Scripture, and that our God is perfectly able to use scripture to useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness—that's from second Timothy, chapter 3. Which means we can't ignore the possibility that God is speaking to us, right here, right now, today. OK, so if that is happening, then what is God saying to us, right here, today?

In talking to the soldiers, the tax collectors, and the common people, John says Don't hoard what you have. Don't cheat others. Don't use your power to extort people. All deal with justice. All of these things deal with possessions—this is not abstract. All of these deal with relationships with others.

Do we see these rules being broken or ignored in our own time?

More importantly, are we free to ignore that?

When the crowds ask John what to do, his directions are concrete and practical: Building a home for all requires sharing resources, especially when we have more than we need. It requires establishing relationships of trust, something the soldiers and tax collectors didn't have a great track record with. Building a home for all is in part an economic endeavor, requiring faithful stewardship and a commitment to follow through. John's message is a list of rules to be able to care for one another and be in right relationship. Rules that sound like good news if you have been on the wrong side of that for too long. So long that the people as in Zephaniah thought is this ever going to get any better. That is really good news!

I hope you've enjoyed the Close To Home devotional. In this week's readings, there is a poem that really speaks to this type of relationship with one another that John is talking about. Going from a relationship of extortion and exploitation to one of sibling-like care. The person who wrote it, Rev. Sarah Are Speed, calls it Advocating for Home:

I know you don't feel at home in your body.
Your clothes don't feel right.
Your bones don't feel right.
Your name, just a word that people have labeled you with.

I see the way you try on pronouns like I try on clothes, looking for something—anything—that feels right.

And what I would give to build you a shelter— a safe space where you could be,
a home where you were safe and free.

What I would give to carve out some room for you to process and grieve
and dance and sing your way
into your true self.

But I know
it's not that easy.

My hands cannot build you safety.
My words cannot give you time.
My heart cannot be home enough.
So until the day when you are truly at home, I will keep marching for you.

I will keep advocating for the home you deserve— the home in your own skin.
I will keep praying.
I will give you my second coat,

and the shirt off my back, and the food from my table. I won't give up on preparing the way.

A voice is calling out in the wilderness. Do you hear it?

There's more for us here than has been before.

These words offer another way to get inside this message. Ultimately, John's fiery message is one of great joy. We are called to collectively build and repair the structures of our society, side by side, together, Wherever we build, God is there. What we build should be a place large enough and with room enough for all. To our ears, John the Baptist's good news can sound harsh, but what he preaches is a place where inequities are banished, valleys are lifted up, THAT is a Home for All. That is good news.

What else? Two things—John preaches of impending fire and the wrath to come. He says that there is someone coming after him, and that if you have a hard time with John’s words, boy, you are going to have a hard time with the next guy. He will baptize with Fire! His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, and to burn up the chaff.”

John is NOT saying “Jesus is coming to send you to hell.”

John is not speaking about separating the saved and unsaved. I think John is saying something about separating within ourselves the chaff that needs to be burned away so that the wheat of our lives may remain.

Are there any parts of you that you are ashamed of? Parts of you that you don’t want anymore, parts that keep you from loving others, parts that are a wall between you and your relationship with God, or anything else? I think John is saying that Jesus is coming, and that those parts will be burned away—gone!— so that you made in the image of God may remain. That is really good news!

Baptism is of repentance; to turn away from what keeps us from God, and towards God, and towards what has us bear fruits of the Spirit: forgiveness, generosity, kindness. It is odd, because this is good news, but we don’t usually think of John as a bearer of good news. It is a reframing.

Lastly: If “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (v. 6), then this is not a spectator sport. This is about all of us playing a part in the story of God’s salvation. Like John, we are also called for a specific place and time: Here and now, for our part. Let our collective voices cry out in the wilderness—and everywhere—with good news. And, as the message is heard, more and more people may listen, more and more people may join us in building the kin-dom of God, making it truly a home for all.

And a message proclaiming the kingdom of God as a kingdom truly for all people? I can’t think of a better message of joy than that.

Amen.