

**Joy and Living Dangerously: A Sermon by The Rev. Craig Lemming  
St. John the Baptist's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis  
Sunday, December 17, 2017 – Third Sunday of Advent: Gaudete Sunday**

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Today is the third Sunday of Advent: Gaudete Sunday – the Sunday of Rejoicing.

As such, I greet you with the words of St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians:

**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.<sup>1</sup>**

Today, our Patron Saint, John the Baptist, invites us to testify to the light of Christ:

God's true light, which enlightens everyone, who is coming into the world.<sup>2</sup> On

Gaudete Sunday, it might be difficult to imagine John as a particularly joyful

person. From the earliest Orthodox Icons to modern depictions of him, we see

John the Baptist as an unkempt desert saint, barefoot, with wiry, sun-scorched

limbs, raggedly clad in camel's hair, bits of half-eaten locusts and sticky wild

honey tangled in his scraggly beard, an intense glare in his eyes, and in most

Icons, John frequently holds his own severed head on a platter: a reference to his

martyrdom at the hands of Rome's puppet-king Herod.<sup>3</sup> Jollity is not what we

immediately think of with this imagery of John in mind. So, I was delighted to

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 4:4-6 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> John 1:6-9.

<sup>3</sup> Linette Martin, *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner's Guide to Icons* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), 173.

discover that Joy does indeed infuse the life of John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Luke when the Angel Gabriel appears to John's father Zechariah we read:

**... the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at [John's] birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord... even before his birth [John] will be filled with the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup>**

When Elizabeth – the name of this church's tower bell – is six months pregnant with John, her relative Mary visits her, and we read that:

**When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."<sup>5</sup>**

I believe that the Joy of the Holy Spirit present at the conception of John in Elizabeth's womb is the same leaping joy that infused John's charismatic, humble, and prophetic witness to the Christ. I believe that it was John's infectious joy that drew crowds from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside into the wilderness; to the banks of the Jordan.<sup>6</sup> John's magnetism is affirmed by theologian Paula

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:13-15.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:41-45.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:5.

Fredriksen who observes that in Jesus and John's lifetimes, John was actually the more popular leader.<sup>7</sup> Fredriksen goes on to say, **"what sealed John's fate was not his message per se, but his message combined with his personal popularity. Such a preacher of such a message, with a committed following, could at any moment ignite a revolt."**<sup>8</sup> John's witness to the light of Christ by radical truth-telling posed so strong a political threat to Herod's power that John, like so many prophets, was beheaded for the sake of preserving an oppressive status quo.<sup>9</sup> An astonishingly bright and beautiful light was snuffed out by a tyrant intoxicated with fear, greed, and the idolatry of power. Nevertheless, John's joyful witness lives on in Jesus' words who proclaims, **"[John] was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light."**<sup>10</sup> How did John, beset by the crushing oppression of Rome, manage to keep the Holy Spirit's light burning within him, and let her light shine with such infectious joy and charisma?

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2nd ed., Yale Nota Bene (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 595.

<sup>10</sup> John 5:35.

In their co-created work, *The Book of Joy*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu share the Holy wisdom they have garnered during their long, faith-filled lives. Their co-writer Douglas Abrams writes,

**Their joy is clearly not easy or superficial but one burnished by the fire of adversity, oppression, and struggle... They offer us the reflection of real lives filled with pain and turmoil in the midst of which they have been able to discover a level of peace, of courage, of joy that we can aspire to in our own lives... Suffering is inevitable, they said, but how we respond to that suffering is our choice. Not even oppression or occupation can take away this freedom to choose our response.<sup>11</sup>**

John's response to Roman oppression and occupation was to know who he was and who he was not. When plagued with a barrage of questions from authorities who attempt to cram him into a category or fix him to a label, John refuses to be confined by their myopia, confounding their sly plots with a Holy "No."<sup>12</sup> John is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor any other prophet. No one can tell John who he might be because he takes joy in being authentically himself: God's humble witness testifying to the light of Christ<sup>13</sup> in midst of a gross political nightmare; a thrilling voice of Truth that cuts through the din of lies spun by those in seats of power. So how do we respond to adversity, oppression, and struggle in our own

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<sup>11</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016), 3, 7.

<sup>12</sup> John 1:19-22.

<sup>13</sup> John 1:6-8.

lives? In this season of Advent, perhaps you are struggling with grief and loss, or loneliness, or your heart is aching to feel God's Joy again. In this struggle, perhaps you are longing to know yourself again: who you are and who you are not. In the tradition of Saint John who baptized with water<sup>14</sup> the prayer of consecration at our own Holy Baptism reminds us who we are: **by water and the Holy Spirit, God has given us inquiring and discerning hearts, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works.**<sup>15</sup> This is who we are. John and Jesus' response to life's woes teaches us what Friedrich Nietzsche observed: **"the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and greatest enjoyment is *to live dangerously!*"**<sup>16</sup> John responded to Roman terrorism by living a dangerously joyful life. In that life-threatening wilderness John invites the people of God to turn away from the lies, fears, and deceptions of Empire; and to return to our true selves again; to make our fragmented lives whole again by turning to Grace; to become who we really are.<sup>17</sup> When we respond to pain and suffering in this way, we begin to live out the

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<sup>14</sup> John 1:26-27.

<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, 308.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 161.

<sup>17</sup> John H. Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People: Learning through the Church Year* (New York: Seabury Press, 2005), 82.

Jubilee we heard from the Prophet Isaiah. By living joyful lives in the face of terror, we are liberated to continue Christ's radical fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic vision<sup>18</sup> by dangerously choosing:

**to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor by returning land and property to its ancestral owners;<sup>19</sup> to comfort and provide for all who mourn – to give them a garland instead of ashes; the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.<sup>20</sup>**

To do this is to live dangerously. When Jesus read these words and pronounced their fulfillment, the people of Nazareth were so filled with rage that they drove Jesus to a cliff to hurl him to his death.<sup>21</sup> To live our lives in the Spirit of John the Baptist and the Christ, is to live dangerously into life's greatest Joy: to love God, our neighbors, ourselves, and all Creation radically. So, dear friends,

**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Amen.**

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<sup>18</sup> Luke 4:16-21.

<sup>19</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 4th ed. (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1049.

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 61:1-3.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 4:28-29.

<sup>22</sup> Philippians 4:4-7 (adapted).