

“Restorative Joy” – ADVENT III (Luke 3:7-18)
Ned Allyn Parker

Our journey through Advent parallels the journey through life. The realities of unrest and war and despair and hate are ever-present. They threaten to call our attention away from the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. These present realities deter us from focusing on the Christ candle yet to be lit in the Advent wreath, and distract us from its presence already lit and burning in our hearts.

Advent is about expectancy, yes, but within this expectancy we are called to be fully present to what is already here. Advent is about looking ahead to tomorrow, AND about a mature awareness of today. We’re mindful of the candles because they draw our attention to their light, yet the tensions that threaten to blow them out whisper in the shadows we ourselves cast.

Just as our present story parallels the weekly themes for Advent, this world we inhabit parallels the unfolding drama of the Christmas story. We hear the refrain echo down through two millennia from that lone innkeeper: “There is no room *here* for *you*.” At that same front stoop, women are now at risk of being denied healthcare, as Mary was denied access to the shelter of a warm room. Self-designated soldiers patrol our streets in plainclothes, bearing concealed firearms that would better serve if recast into plowshares. Herod Trump threatens the innocents already left exposed and vulnerable by their present circumstances. Blogger, Erik Parker, writes, “Somehow, this year, we’ve *all* become innkeepers” in some way.

So, those candles remind us that what was *remains* relevant.

Enter now the complex nature of the candle of Joy.

When it comes to Advent sermons, I could preach about Hope, Peace, or Love with at least some modicum of confidence. With these I'm comfortable, though they may be equally complex.

Joy, however... I'm not always sure I know exactly what joy is or how to talk about it... Even though Gary Davis assures me, "Joy is half off this week over at Bartells."

How, in a world as broken as this one, do I get up here and say simply, succinctly – and perhaps even courageously – "Oh, be joyful"? And I wonder how I do that while staying faithful to our scripture passage this morning? As one commentator offers, "If John's preaching is part of the preparation for [the joy in] Jesus' ministry, Luke could hardly have found a more disturbing introduction than John's address...: 'You brood of vipers!'"

As I struggled with these personal shortcomings, I realized there was at least one person I could ask to stand and light the Advent candle with the conviction and resourcefulness and JOY required of this task.

When I asked the Fields family to light the candle of joy, my conversation with Toni played out like this:

Me: "Hey Toni, is there any chance you'd like to light the Advent candle this week with your family?"

Toni: "Which candle is it?"

Me (the worst pastor ever): "Um... Joy?"

Toni (a better pastor than I any day of the week): "Oh, I AM joy! That's me! I am totally joy!"

Me: So... that's a 'yes'?

I knew in that moment that whatever I said, no matter how I framed it, this sermon would only be a footnote to the Fields' words. Her response to my request was the simple gift of joy at the opportunity to BE JOY both in front of... and on behalf of... us all.

"Joy? I AM joy!"... As we used to say in seminary: "That'll preach!"

Our prayers are with her and Oliver who is really not feeling well this morning.

The candles of Advent don't call us to *bring* gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love, but to *be* those gifts – to live with them in our hearts and to express them as parts of our very being for a world waiting to unwrap them. It's a reminder that we're called out of the vanity of pleasure and into a sacred *identity* of Joy – to *exist* in joy.

It's a curious juxtaposition – joy and pleasure. It gives me no *pleasure* that we live in times that compel us to put "We love our Muslim neighbors" on the lightboard. It does give me great **joy** we live in a community where we can, and we do.

I think pleasure is frequently the name of the game. Isn't it? We seek pleasure or gratification rather than joy, and yet far too often pleasure comes at the expense of joy. Our own pleasure certainly often comes at the expense of the joy of others.

The crowd asked John, "What should we do?"

In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Even tax collectors asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you're supposed to."

Soldiers asked him, "And *we*, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort people."

Representatives of the community, representatives of the state, and representatives of the military all present and wondering the same thing: What then should we do?

In this story, Luke presents a group of pleasure-seekers; all of them asking John for wisdom. To each of them, John says, "Seek self-oriented satisfaction no longer. Instead, share what you have." John's words indicate the shallow nature of self-gratification, the dignity it can strip from the neighbor, and the frequency and ease with which it's sought over and against joy.

Like this line of representatives who stood before John, during Advent our own community stands with expectation asking, "What then should WE do?" In simple words, John encourages all of us toward restoration with our fellow humanity. It is in that restoration, I believe we find the true Advent gift of Joy.

John says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Live so the fruits of the spirit grow organically from your very way of being in the world, and let these fruits be your gifts to others.

I had the opportunity to reflect with the audience at Seattle Jazz Vespers last week. Together, we wrestled with the challenges holidays sometimes bring into our homes. Often when we gather for Thanksgiving and Chanukah and eventually Christmas, we find ourselves surrounded by people we love... and who can also irritate the living daylights out of us. In these instances, our bodies can become physically depleted by

cooking and cleaning and decorating, yet simultaneously our souls become depleted by the ever-present holiday table debates.

Yes, we find ourselves approaching an election cycle, and political debates are a ubiquitous fixture on TV, online, and even – of course – at these holiday meals.

But these days *everything* is debated – all facts are debatable, and this present reality seems to have overtaken our corporate ability to just be with one another, because we take pleasure out of being right, talking faster, knowing more...

There is *my* truth and there is *your* [with quotations] **“truth.”** There is *our* truth and there is *their* [with quotations] **“truth.”** These competing truths come at the expense of each other – and eventually at the expense of relationships. Even among friends and family, what we once called ‘middle ground’ is quickly collapsing into a vast chasm between us; bridges are burned before they can be built.

Perhaps you’ve noticed how a strategically posted meme on social media becomes a new truth – even when “truth” doesn’t mean it’s accurate or factual.

Far too often, these days, we seem to be concluding we can no longer agree to disagree. Eventually we are silenced or we become the silencer. We are often incapacitated by an unwillingness to have conversations – real dialogue.

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But the Advent candles call us to attention and remind us of the perpetual nature of expectancy – the constant and ever-present recognition that our own role in expectancy should mean we’re not caught between the candles of peace and joy but that we move organically from one to the other – much like the previous week’s movement from Hope into Peace – bearing good and worthy fruits.

Perhaps if we mute the debates (even temporarily) and we seek peace in our relationships, we will move with some fluidity into the joy we experience when we have opportunities to be together.

I recognize we sometimes take great pleasure from a good debate, but too often this pleasure comes at the expense of joy. When there are winners, there will always be losers, and our capacity for peace is sacrificed – peace for ourselves and joy for our children.

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It occurs to me we've had a theme running through our Advent weeks together.

When Justin and Hannah stood before us two weeks ago, they pointed to little Maria, who gazed out at us from her little carrier, and they said, "We were never really sure how to talk about hope in this world we live in... but then she was born. It only took one look at her to realize because of her we are compelled to hope."

The following week we watched the video of the Williams family, who sent us their reflections on the simple gifts of peace in light of their experiences in Paris during the attacks there, and their preparations to leave for missionary work in the Congo where 4,000 south Sudanese refugees have just arrived in a country creating refugees of its own. The Williams said that they needed the simple gift of peace – they *needed* it – for their four children, and all the children of the world.

This week, when Toni and I talked about the Fields lighting the candle of Joy, she pointed at Oliver and asked, "How could I not exist in joy with this little guy in my life?"

Next week – spoiler alert – Mike Stern will teach the children a song during the Time with Children called "Love Makes a Family."

Children have been ever-present in these reflections. Like some of you, I don't have children of my own, but I find myself compelled by these messages to experience hope, peace, joy, and love in light of their presence – which is appropriate as we look ahead to Christmas – the moment we welcome the Holy One who would be among us in the form of a little child. At the close of our final service on Christmas Eve we will sing Joy to the World BECAUSE of that child's presence among us. Meister Eckhart once said, "When I am afraid I want to hold a child's hand."

When we find ourselves asking, "What then should we do," we remember:

If hearing John's challenge and holding a child's hand teach us anything: it's about the great depth of joy present in that manger on Christmas morning.

If hearing John's challenge and holding a child's hand teach us anything: it's that Advent expectancy and Present Joy can be contemporaneous.

If hearing John's challenge and holding a child's hand teach us anything, it's that loving our neighbors (and even our family) means restoring relationships instead of commodifying them.

We light this Advent candle asking "Teacher, what then should we do?"

John's answer seems clear: "When the time comes, don't just be *better* innkeepers; be *joyful innkeepers*."

In preparation, may that joy begin with you and me, right now.

In preparation, may we cast off the pursuit of mere pleasure to exist in great joy, right now.

In preparation, may we lift our spirits in song and experience a foretaste of that joy because we get to be together, right now – and may it continue to be so.

