Pinebrooke Community Church 15 December 2024 “Joy” Luke 3:7-18

C.S. Lewis wrote, “Happiness is about what happens, joy is not!” What is his point? The point is joy is deeper than happiness just as trust is deeper than love. It was announced by the angelic host at the first Advent, *“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’”* (Matthew 2:10). It is easy to see the good news regarding the Savior, but in John the Baptist’s declaration there is additional good news that the Savior brings to the universe of His creation…the deep sense of wholeness. Joy is defined as, *“peace dancing.”* The joy that comes when all is well and all will be well! To grasp the roots of joy we turn to John’s conversation regarding repentance.

*“John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. What should we do then? The crowd asked. John answered, ‘The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.’ Tax collectors also came to be baptized, ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘what should we do? Don’t collect any more than you are required to,’ he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, ‘And what should we do?’ He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.’ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”’*

Luke is telling John’s story. To begin with John is a prophet, a straight shooter if you will, a forerunner announcing the coming of the Messiah. And the role of the prophet is to warn! How are we with responding to warnings? It struck the audience following John as a convicting word. Seeing the Pharisees and Sadducees showing up challenged John’s sensibilities. They needed to be cut down a peg or two, so he calls them snakes. In a way we are all in the same boat in desperate need of repentance.  Repentance and fruit go together in God’s economy. If there is no fruit, is repentance real? John would say, not really. Stated positively, produce fruit in keeping with repentance. There are no excuses and your status in life is no excuse including the status of religious leaders. True repentance is definite and there is no defensiveness in repentance. Nothing to defend when humility is present. With God the metric is fruitfulness. If fruitfulness doesn’t show up, then the tree cries out for the axe. The axe is John’s metaphor for God’s judgment. If there is no fruit, then the tree is just taking up space. John’s message is that openness to being taught is the kingdom of God way. Openness or humility or teachability are essential for both entering God’s kingdom and living in His kingdom as well. True repentance must be learned. We don’t come by it naturally. This openness is a work of the Holy Spirit in convicting men of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. No wonder John was suspect of the Pharisees and Sadducees! By and large they were not a teachable lot, educated but not teachable. The kingdom of God that repentance leads to is a revolutionary way of life. We don’t come to this way of life naturally because our nature is always to want what we want when we want it. The repentance that leads to joy is not self-created but is ignited by self-surrender to the way, will, and glory of God. To receive what was coming in Jesus the path John’s audience was being called to was an opening of one’s heart to receive the different way that was to be the way of the gospel, the way of joy. The way John spoke of earlier was to lower the hills, fill in the gaps, and to set the road straight. The hilly, crooked, valley filled way would allow for happiness, but sabotage joy. John’s message was stark enough that he began to feel messianic to those who were willing to listen and hear. Somewhere rooted deep in their souls this message was calling forth something that had been buried through hearing the reading of Isaiah week after week in synagogue. As John spelled out in comparative terms the One who is coming is categorically greater. He, John, is inferior to the Someone who is yet to come and his baptism is likewise inferior. Comparison is important to make the point. *“Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal – thong” Untying the sandal-thong was just too far below the disciple to do.” (p. 107).* If one were a respected disciple, no teacher would ask him to do that, yet that is precisely the context of comparison that John used to describe himself in relationship to the One coming. The Messiah brings with himself the work of separating the fruit from the chaff or husk. The strange dynamic of the Holy One was both to include but also to separate. And in this way joy is the outcome of fruitfulness. The offer of joy is tied into the journey of repentance. In a way John, as do all prophets, sounded harsh but the path to joy that the Savior was to bring was serious business. Coming to grips with oneself amid repentance was the only way to prepare to receive the way love was to come to them. In the spirit of John holiness was to precede both joy and love else what you would have would not be either real joy or love at all. John ends the gist of his sermon to them with a metaphor that all of his audience was familiar with. The winnowing fork, the threshing floor, the wheat, and the chaff. The warning was a warning to get ready, God is not messing around. He develops the judgment theme using the familiar experience of threshing wheat. John’s conclusion to his sermon is unmistaken. His conclusion is in the strong expression that emphasizes the certainty and completeness of judgment. This wasn’t new to them. The wisdom of the scriptures always compared the righteous and the wicked. The picture is made clear in David’s words that they would have been completely familiar with…Psalm 1. We tend to have tender ears that easily turn off the voice of a prophet like John, but we ought not. John’s audience was more used to it as it had been part of their heritage. So, what has he given us as a gift today? Just as repentance and fruit go together so do the Savior and the Judge go together. Tozer put it this way, *“It is God’s role alone to maintain the moral wholeness of the universe.”* To be the author of righteousness it is imperative that God also be the One who applies it so that joy can become the fruit of the goodness of Christ. Joy is the destination of the grace and works of the Almighty. As we walk in the light as He is in the light joy is our destination. Our salvation is a great source of joy and the fact that God is maintaining moral wholeness gives us a great sense of joy, remember, *peace dancing*. What is going on all around us that we can see is not the end of the story. We do live under the *shadow of the Almighty* and that in and of itself gives us hope and peace and joy. What happens is not all that there is. There is joy that in the end life is not arbitrary. There is always and intentionality with God. When God and who He is, is at the center of the universe there is hope, peace, joy, and love. John today has spoken about the path, but Jesus is the destination. We engage the season best when our eyes are fixed on the destination. When our consciences which are created by God fit the moral universe of God there is great joy fed by the *shalom* or peace of God. Indeed, joy is peace dancing. Therefore, Dame Julian is not mentally ill but full of faith in the midst of the plague when she said, *“All is well and all shall be well!”* She has the incarnation of the Holy One of Israel in sight.