

A sermon preached Almaden Valley United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
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Luke 3:7-18

Anticipate Joy

We are down by the river again with John the Baptist. Flocks of people are descending on the river to see John and to seek deliverance and good tidings. And how does John greet them? “You brood of vipers!” John greets them by calling them names! He calls them a bunch of snakes!

Not only does John call the people serpents, but he goes on to “dis” their Jewish heritage. “Oh, no, just because you call yourselves the ‘children of Abraham’ doesn’t get you off the hook! You are a dime a dozen (The Message)” John seems to be telling these hungry people who actually feel quite oppressed. Talk about a slap of cold water in your face.

Okay, John, I think you have made your point. Lighten up will you! So does John find some cheer for them, something joyful to say to make the throng of would-be baptized folks feel better? Not our John. He goes on to tell them “⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:9) In effect John is echoing the words of the song I remember hearing so often at Christmas time. You know that one that goes “You better not pout, you better not cry, you better not shout I’m telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town!” Except in John’s case he is proclaiming the coming of one who even he, John, cannot hold a candle to, or as John puts it “I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the “Holy Spirit and fire,” John says. Oh, joy, the people must be saying to themselves “first, this downer of a guy and another one who is coming who is going to light our pants on fire! And this new guy is going to separate out the good folks from the bad and throw the sinners into the unquenchable fires of hell.”

Now I find it really interesting that the lectionary gurus of our time have chosen this passage from Luke to share with us on the Advent Sunday in which we are supposed to be celebrating this thing called “joy!” Where is the joy from our brother John and in the coming message of Jesus? Oh, I know, at the end of this passage the narrator of our story has the temerity to tell us “¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the *good news* to

the people. (Luke 3:18; Emphasis mine)” Where’s the good news in this? Vipers, slashing axes, and unquenchable fires! I think sometimes we should take a breath and wonder what these gospel writers were thinking when they put angry words like these into their stories about Jesus. Where is the gospel? Where is the good news for the joyful Sunday in Advent?

The Christmas holidays are funny times. They are supposed to be filled with such great love and joy and hope and peace, yet it is one of the most stressful times of the year for people. I was reading in *The Senior Journal* about a study which showed that (and I quote) “Christmas is the deadliest day of the year, say researchers who examined records of 53 million deaths from natural causes over a 26-year period (1973-2001). Cardiac and non-cardiac deaths peak during Christmas and News Year.”¹ People are too busy, it seems, to take care of themselves and, of course, the stresses of life and in relationships all seem to get magnified during the Christmas holidays.

Dr. Alice Jacobs, M.D., who was president of the American Heart Association, said these tips can help keep your heart healthy during the holidays:

- Don’t skip regular appointments because of the holidays. Reschedule if you need to.
- Stick to your healthy habits through the holidays, and help your family do the same.
- Be sure you have enough of your usual medications to allow for holiday business/pharmacy closings and travel.
- Check out the medical facilities where you’ll be traveling. Ask your physician who you could see if you need a doctor away from home.
- If you have symptoms, don’t ignore them.²

I think I would add to this list:

- Take time to be quiet at least once per day. Read a book, read the Bible (perhaps not the passage we read this morning!), say a prayer.
- Get away from the shops and malls and restaurants and take some time to breath in the fresh outdoor air or admire some flowers.
- Give of your time and money to someone who needs it. Giving can be a great stress reliever.
- Go see an inspirational movie.

¹ Find at <http://seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Health/4-12-22ChristmasDeadly.htm>.

² Find at <http://seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Health/4-12-22ChristmasDeadly.htm>.

- Tell someone who you haven't said it to in a long time that you love them.

Although this passage we read this morning was tough, I really believe what the author of the gospel of Luke was trying to do was give some joy through giving hope to the people for which the story was being written. Luke's community no doubt was going through some tough times, some probably of their own making, but mostly because they were be shunned by old friends or oppressed by old empires. And Luke understood that before real joy and peace can happen we most often have to go through some tough times. But, if you have faith in God, your cup is more often than not half full rather than half empty. Advent's Latin root means "coming." Marcus Borg says that "advent thus means 'toward the coming.'"³ Our joy is found in the anticipation of freedom from oppression, pain, arguments and stress and in the joy of knowing through the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, that God actually does dwell within each one of us and the love of God is always accessible if we but reach down inside our very souls and act in ways that exhibit that love, peace, joy, and hope that is already naturally within us. The birth of the baby Jesus symbolizes something that has already come, is coming now, and will come in the future. All of us have the spirit of God within us and if we can but remember that as often as possible, and take care of ourselves, our personal worlds with bring us so much greater joy and hope. This is the good news of Christmas! Amen.

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³ Borg, Marcus J. and Crossan, John Dominic. *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth*. New York: HarperOne, 2007, 231.