

A Home For All: Joy

Prayer

Season's greetings, you brood of vipers!

I saw that line on a cross stitch pattern recently....

Somehow this phase hasn't caught on like "Merry and bright" or "Tis the season" or even "ho ho ho." I've yet to see anyone hang a season's greetings, you brood of vipers banner on their lawn—let me know if you do.

So if I were going to think of a hype man for joy, it probably wouldn't be John the Baptist.

I would want someone who smiles broadly, engages people, invites them in, motivates them.

Think more Peloton instructor, less repentance and death.

Not this man who smells like he's been hanging out with camels and crushing locusts.

Not this man whose idea of a good time involves axes cutting down trees and comes talking about fire.

Not this man who comes out of the shadows and tangles of Advent just as I'm setting up my "light up Labrador retriever" Christmas lawn ornament.

But John is exactly who we get.

John is who we get this week, and every Advent.

He shows up in Mark, and Matthew, and Luke, and even in John's gospel.

Sometimes he has a leather belt, and sometimes, like in this passage from Luke, he stays around to talk a while longer.

Because we can't take this trip to the stable and the manger without him.

Before we sing "Joy to the World" we need the silence.

Before we kneel before the baby Jesus, we need this time of preparing and stirring,
Reflecting and praying.
This time of seeing again and leaving behind that only John can give us.

In medieval times, the weeks of Advent were not marked by hope, peace, joy and love.

They were, rather, given the names, “Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell.”

Who wants to sign up to light the candle of hell this Advent? Wouldn't that be a fun family reading?

And yet, I don't think that these medieval themes and ours today are truly that far apart.

Because John points us to a more complex and deeper understanding of what true joy can be.

A way tied to repentance and remaking what is.

Consider that right now 2,750 people on this earth have more wealth than half the planet.

Consider that during the COVID pandemic, the Doorways domestic violence shelter in Arlington has been up to 120% of capacity, and has reported seeing more severe and lethal domestic violence cases.

Consider that a staff member at Northern Virginia Family Services said recently, “I'm always surprised by what we seem to be comfortable with as a nation. It costs more to keep people in poverty than to pay them a living wage. One company gives out food stamp applications as part of their new employee onboarding process.”

Consider that the people who are servicing your car, checking you out at a grocery store, or driving you in an Uber might not have a home.

Scott Miller of Path Forward reflected that, as he goes about his life in Arlington, almost every day he sees guests of their shelter working throughout the community.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet swears, "The time is out of joint:
O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right."

Hamlet, of course, is saying it in a very different context than JTB.... But it's an apt description, both for John's time and ours. The time is out of joint.

So how do we travel from all that is out of joint.... to joy?

Father Alexander Schmemmann conceived of the idea of a "Sad brightness" including.... "the sadness of my exile.... the brightness of God's presence and forgiveness, the joy of the recovered desire for God, the peace of the recovered home."

He writes, "The knowledge of the fallen world does not kill joy, which emanates in this world, always, constantly, as a bright sorrow."

The knowledge of the fallen world does not kill joy, which emanates as a bright sorrow....

I love this idea of joy as a bright sorrow in a broken world.
And I think this is why we get the ax and the vipers, the wrath to come and the roads prepared for the Lord.

The word John uses for repentance here can be understood as "turning."

To repent is to turn.

The crowd asks John, "What then should we do?"
We ask today, "What then should we do?"
We can turn and follow the bright sadness.

The bright sadness and not the surface shine with no substance and no truth.

The bright sadness and not the dystopian narrative that says we are only doomed.

Against these two extremes in our society, where it feels like half the time we are being told, “Things are merry and bright but can be even merrier and brighter if you consume more!” and “All is perishing, so there is no point,” the bright sadness is a theological truth we need.

Because this is what John is saying.

He is looking around at a world and he’s seeing tax collectors skimming off the top and feasting, and he’s seeing people in a village who can’t fall asleep at night because they’re so hungry.

He’s seeing people claim that because they came from Abraham’s lineage that they are good with God, and he’s saying to them—that’s not what matters. You don’t get to show your 23 and Me results and say you’re good from there.

It’s the way you live, the way you treat those you pass in the street and those you leave off the invitation.

It’s the life with you share with your neighbor on the day her husband dies, and it’s what you do when your child’s preschool assistant can’t afford housing.

And he’s saying that we, all of us, need to turn and go in a new direction.

Toward the possibility of a new earth where ways are prepared even in the wilderness.... That is the brightness.

And the sorrow is that this is not yet true.

We need to turn and go toward the brightness of God’s promises of a home for all, a place of belonging for every child, whoever they love, however they identify,

And the sorrow that this is not yet true.

Repent, turn, John the Baptist says.

In Richmond, the space around where a Confederate statue stood was transformed. The circle around it morphed into an all-hours civic forum, with speeches, gospel choirs, a vegetable garden, voter registration tents and even pickup basketball games.

In Charlottesville, the Robert E. Lee statue that was part of the deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017 was removed. Just this week, Charlottesville City Council announced that it will be given to the black-led Swords into Plowshares initiative. Andrea Douglas, the center's ED said, "Our hope with 'Swords into Plowshares' is to create something that transforms what was once toxic in our public space into something beautiful that can be more reflective of our entire community's social values."

"We're giving people opportunities to engage with our own narratives and our own histories. This project offers a road map for other communities to do the same."

Repent, turn, John the Baptist says.

What about us?

What then should we do?

This past week, we had two "Close to Home" zoom sessions with nonprofit partners of Rock Spring. These community organizations—New Hope Housing, Shelter House, Culpepper Garden, Doorways, APAH, PathForward, and Bridges to Independence—spoke about their work in this community, and specifically, this work over the past two years.

And I want to tell you how one got started. In 1926 Dr. Charles Culpepper, a botanist with the USDA bought five acres of land Arlington. Yes, 100 years ago you could just go and buy five acres of land here! He used the land to breed daffodils and daylilies and create a

playground for his children. Dr. Culpepper lived on the property for decades and his children grew up. And one Sunday he was in church at UUCA and he heard a sermon about the needs of low income seniors in Arlington. And after hearing that sermon, he took his land and sold it at reduced cost to the independent nonprofit housing corporation established by the Unitarian Church.

Cheryl Ramp, speaking for the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing, urged us, “Make some of your volunteer time for advocacy. So much depends on laws and zoning, and your voice matters.”

And as all of these partners spoke, and the needs in our community were made so clear, Margaret asked a question about how we can work together for the good. When there is so much need, she asked, how can we increase our impact?

She was essentially asking, “What then should we do?”

Joy Myers of Doorways responded by saying, “Be amplifiers!” Amplify the good. Amplify the stories of what is working and what is healing and what is happening to repair in our community. Amplify the possible. Amplify the brightness. The sorrow might not disappear, at least not right now, but we can amplify what is bright. She said, “Talk about the fact that people in Arlington need housing, that domestic violence is real, that people can’t afford child care. And share what we are doing about it. Help tell our stories and get the word out. So many people here still do not know about the needs or the responses to those needs.”

Be amplifiers of the good.

Amplify the good.

What then should we do?

In a span of ten days, Rock Spring had three Heritage Members pass away.... Steve Emery, Lucy Spencer, and, on Wednesday night, Jack Taylor.

And against the sorrow of their passing from us, we hold up the brightness they made real with their lives.

Steve, who volunteered to play music at senior communities. He tried to be sensitive to playing songs from the Great American Songbook (Cole Porter, Berlin, Ira Gershwin, etc.) and after he finished playing, and a woman came up to him and said, "Don't you know any rock and roll?"

Lucy, who reflected that the world would be better if we paid more attention to foxes and less to guns and fear.

And Jack, who held on to his essential kindness and regard for other people even when he had a feeding tube and his days were narrow. Who took on telling the layered story of his father, Maxwell Taylor, in a book.

We honor the ways they made the brightness real.

And maybe in this season, you are remembering the people in your life who taught you of the brightness even against the sorrow and grief of their passing.

(pause)

In his poem A Brief for the Defense, Jack Gilbert writes,

*To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.*

....There will be music despite everything.

To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.... That line is a whole sermon unto itself.

John the Baptist didn't sing Christmas carols, of course. But if he would stop by here and linger with us now, I think he would have an affection for the third verse of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." This is a verse that I know has meaning for some of you too. Listen now, and hear.....

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

What then should we do?
We, under loads that can feel crushing,
Our forms bended low....
Should rest beside the weary road.
The angels are singing.
There is music, despite everything.
There is brightness.
There is joy.
We can listen,
And sing with the angels.
Amen

Benediction:

Repent, turn.

Amplify the good.

Acknowledge the world's great sorrow,

And move toward the brightness.

Come home, again.