

Immanuel United Church
Third Advent | Seeking the Spirit | Sprig of Joy
Dec 12th, 2021

Welcome

Announcements

“The fruit of the Spirit is
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...”

Those who are in Christ are distinguished from others
in that they have been gifted with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to bear fruit.

Love: Apple
Joy: Pear
Peace: Any exotic fruit
Patience: Banana
Kindness: Orange
Generosity: Cantaloupe
Faithfulness: Lemon or lime
Gentleness: Avocado
Self-control: Pineapple

Choral Introit: VU 31 *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You*

Call to Worship:

Arise and celebrate, good news of deep joy is here!
The warm glow of the Divine lightens our hearts.

Lighting the third Advent Candle

Candlelighter:

The joy of Christ is good news, unexpected and surprising in its overflowing.

All:

**God-who-lights-up-life give us joyful, generous, and courageous hearts. As we
lean on your love may your joy well up in us so that our joy may overflow and**

flourish, witnessing to a life of constant gratitude, full of grace, cathartic hilarity, and goodness.

(Light the third Advent Candle — Sprig of Joy)

Hymn: VU 34 O-so-so (Come Now, O God of Peace)

(Singing with action)

**O-so-so o-so-so, pyong-hwa-ui-im-gum,
u-ri-ga han-mom i-ru-ge ha-so-so.**

(Singing together)

**Come now, O God of joy, we are your people;
pour out your spirit that we be one body.**

Scripture: Luke 3:7-18 (New International Version)

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, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

Even tax collectors 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 Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not

worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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." And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

The Choir Anthem: In the Bleak Midwinter

Reflection: Who was John the Baptist, really?

Who was John the Baptist, really? A prophet with fiery words, loud, indignant and direct? Calling the crowd who came out to seek his advice and his baptism, "Brood of Vipers", striking fear into their hearts by saying, "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."

John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a cousin of Jesus, was also known to be an ascetic, living alone in the wilderness. His food was locusts and wild honey, his clothes made of rough-woven camel's hair tied with a strip of leather around his waist.

What else can we remember about him? One day, priests and religious authorities from Jerusalem came and asked him, "Who are you?" He confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" "No." They kept interrogating, impatiently, "Then, why are you baptizing, if you are neither Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet? Who are you? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." John defied expectation, and nothing he said or did really matched people's pre-existing ideas of how a prophet should behave. But there was one message that stayed on people's minds for a long time: He declared that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

It makes me really wonder what kind of vocal tone, feeling, impression John the Baptist was giving, when he "cried" in the wilderness. On the surface, harsh, toxic, shaming, cold, judgemental, it nevertheless contained somehow his deeper, profound integrity, passion and love for God and God's people, beyond the fact that the image of venomous snakes with large fangs (He called the crowd, "brood of vipers") is not so comforting.

I wonder, "Did John the Baptist really have to present a hyper-masculine macho persona to proclaim the Kingdom of God is at hand? Was the harshness a necessary contrast to, "One who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." and "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

In Luke 7, we hear Jesus say, "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon"; the Human One (Son of Man) has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners." More than John the Baptist judged others for their sins, calling repentance, he himself was relentlessly and unjustly taunted, mocked, judged, arrested, and murdered, because his voice cried, full of "Sophia" (wisdom) and he baptized "Her Children" (Luke 7:35) with water. People sought John the Baptist, looking for his baptism, offered with water and also with Wisdom (Sophia). There were those who sought him for the wrong reason, just as Herod did when he sent his agent to, "Go and seek diligently for the child" Jesus.

In another passage, when John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see?"

This cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist, is often portrayed as joyless, severe. No. The first record of him in the Bible is that he "leapt for joy" in the womb of his mother, when Elizabeth and Mary greeted each other and rejoiced. Counter to many images that unfairly depict John the Baptist, distort the truth about him, he knew joy. His joy leapt. I do not imagine him to be a single-minded ascetic, with no heart for joy, love, care, kindness, or acceptance. John the Baptist and Jesus had something in common we cannot miss. They were not only relatives connected by their mothers, but their heart and memories were close to the land: the wilderness. When Jesus was born, only the shepherds who slept in open fields among animals could get to see this child. Jesus was born among animals and laid, in swaddling clothes, on a manger – a trough full of hay. When John the Baptist died, Jesus grieved in his heart; he even spent forty days in the same wilderness John the Baptist lived in as he baptized their generation.

When I prepared the reflection this week, I was surprised and deeply moved to find that the Bible mentions "Wisdom" (Sophia) often, especially when it witnesses and reports about John the Baptist and his baptism. For example, Jesus says John the Baptist was obedient to the "Wisdom of the just," and "The wisdom will be validated by all of Her children." (Luke 7:35)

According to Richard Rohr's Centre for Action and Contemplation, "The most fully developed female biblical image for God is in the wisdom literature of ancient Israel. In these, "The wisdom of God" is often personified as a woman. Scholars now commonly refer to this personification as Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom. In Proverbs 8, Sophia speaks of herself. She was with God before creation, and she was the master

worker through whom God created. In Sirach 24, she is from eternity and fills all that is." <https://cac.org/sophia-wisdom-of-god-2017-11-07/>

We opened today's reflection by asking, "Who was John the Baptist, really?" He is enigmatic, not the highway construction supervisor that you might expect from, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's path straight." Those are Elijah's words, which John quoted to explain why he baptized people. A more authentic version of his self-explanation: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." And he knew joy, he leapt for joy, jumped for joy.

Today's scripture also shows that John the Baptist was someone who would give a very practical, specific wisdom to help the seekers of wisdom adjust their lives. For example, in today's reading, the crowd became anxious, asking, "What should we do then?" No surprise they wanted to ask this question, after they heard John the Baptist say, "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." They wanted advice on how to forestall God's wrath.

John the Baptist's answers are not radical, turning the world upside down. They are modest bits of wisdom, specific, small, and yet still challenging. He did not tell them to bulldoze the mountain and dump sand in the valley. John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." Then, the tax collectors chimed in, and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," John answered. Then, some soldiers sought him and asked, "And what should we do?" These tax collectors and soldiers were no less hated than the Romans, because they served the oppressors. They may have been expecting radical answers, but John told them, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely - be content with your pay." John the Baptist is offering moderate, motherly advice, far from his macho, wild-haired, locust-chomping image. He is obedient to Sophia, Wisdom, the presence of God through the time of creation to the birth of Love Incarnate, Jesus.

It is undeniable that John the Baptist used the image of fire a lot in his teaching. For example, "The One who is more powerful than I ... will gather the wheat into his barn, but will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Later Christians equated the image of fire and flame to a burning, torturing hell. And yet, in his own words, fire is associated with the Holy Spirit, with which Jesus will baptize the children of Wisdom.

This Advent, at Immanuel, let us seek the spirit of wisdom, Sophia, of mothering and creating God, who gifts us with a practical, joyful and transforming vision of the future. Let us remember our baptism, born in the Holy Spirit and sealed with water. Let us join

the joy that leaps when two and more relatives in Christ meet and greet and welcome. Let us taste and share with one another the fruits of the Spirit and their fresh and thirst-quenching, delicious juice: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

On this Third Sunday of Advent morning, we ask, “Who was John the Baptist, really?” We find our own story and image, in the stories told about him by the crowd and by Jesus. Let us continue this Advent journey, which is just like John’s character: complex, faithful, fearful, joyful. Let us seek the way of Wisdom, the way of Christmas, the way of the Kin-dom of God, trusting God’s loving kindness and blossoms of love in Bethlehem.

Hymn: VU 23 *Joy Shall Come*

This traditional Israeli song came into wider use around the world in the 1960s, when it first began appearing in folk and global song collections such as Risk: New Hymns for a New Day, Vol. II, No. 3 (1966). Isaiah 35 provided the inspiration for the text with its imagery of living springs and a desert bursting into bloom. I have fond memories as a young child in the early 1970s of singing this song while circle dancing with a grapevine step at church gatherings, starting slowly and then gradually increasing the tempo and energy of the song with each repetition. (Source: United Church of Canada website on worship)

Offering

Let us join in the goodwill of Christmas and in the blessings of the Christ child as we give to the glory of God in all creation.

Hymn: VU 55 *In the Bleak Midwinter* (V 4)

**What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a wise man, I would do my part,
yet what I can I give him — give my heart.**

Prayer:

Abundant God, sustain in us a willing spirit to share peace where there is discontent, to bring healing in the place of hurt, to shine your love into the overlooked corners of our world. Remind us of the joy of reaching out to you even as you already draw us near. Bless all that we offer today and in this Advent. Amen.

Prayers of the People (Marian Mathews)

Hymn: MV 40 *Never Ending Joy*

Choral Extroit: *Peace, Peace* (words and music by Rick and Sylvia Powell)

Peace, peace, peace on earth and good will to all.

This is a time for joy, this is a time for love.

Now let us all sing together of peace, peace, peace on earth.