

12.15.2019 Advent 3 (Matthew 11:2-10)

A few weeks ago the sermon I shared with you was based on our Lord's description of Judgement Day. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that on that day, "*before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left*" (Matthew 25:32-33). As you know, the sheep on His right hand inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world, while the goats on His left are told to depart into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. At the conclusion of our service on that Sunday, I was met by a person at the church doors who made this comment, "Great sermon today Father, especially the scary part about going to hell." I laughed when I heard the comment, and couldn't help but think of it again when I sat down and read the lessons appointed for this Sunday.

The passages from Holy Scripture that we're instructed to read on a particular Sunday are not always words that we want to hear. With so many possibilities, I don't know if I would ever choose to preach a sermon about the reality of hell if I wasn't directed to do so by our lectionary, and with the joyful celebration of Christmas just ten days away, you can be sure that I didn't choose our Gospel reading. If it were up to me, we'd probably be reading about angels singing praises to God, shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, or Magi from the east asking King Herod, "*Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him*" (Matthew 2:2). So thanks be to God that it's not up to me, because if it were we'd miss the opportunity to learn an important lesson about joy from John the Baptist.

When you open the Bible and read John's story, what you find is a direct connection between John the Baptist and joy. John is the one who as a babe *leapt for joy* in his mother's womb when she greeted Mary (Luke 1:44), the one who as a man was filled with *joy* when he heard the sound of Jesus' voice, and John is the one who found his joy *fulfilled* by decreasing while Jesus increased (John 3:29). Holy Scripture provides us with these examples of the joy-filled life of John the Baptist, but if our culture were to look at his life, I wonder if it would come to the same conclusion. If a person in our

society was seeking a more joyful life, do you think they would follow the example of a man who lived alone in the desert, ate locusts and wild honey, and dressed in camel's hair? Not a chance.

The vast majority of people in our culture would never consider the difficult, obedient life that John lived as a pathway to joy, because we've been taught that joy depends on our circumstances. We've been fooled into believing that joy is found in driving home from your dream job, in your new car, to your beautiful house, where your perfect family patiently waits to greet you at the door. This is what your friends on social media would have you believe is the definition of joy, a definition and belief that leads only to heartache, for if your life has been anything like mine, what you've found is that everything in this world will eventually leave you disappointed. Cars break down, companies have lay-offs, and people we love die. If our joy is rooted in the blessings that God gives and takes away, we will never experience the complete joy that we see in John the Baptist.

Consider his example from the Gospel reading. In the passage we read this morning John is in prison awaiting his execution, and the Bible tells us that *"when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto Him, Art thou He that should come, or do we look for another?"* (Matthew 11:2-3). In other words, John is asking, Are you the promised Messiah, our Savior, or do we look for another? For centuries theologians have studied this verse and focused their attention on trying to understand the reason why John asked this question. Some say that John's imprisonment and the thought of his impending execution led him to ask this question because of doubt and despair, while others argue that John never doubted, but simply asked the question so that the disciples who were still with him would hear our Lord's answer and turn to follow Him. These are the two views most often presented by scholars, but these opposing views are both centered on John's current circumstance, and whether or not it would lead him to doubt. Our focus this Sunday morning is joy, a topic that doesn't appear to be addressed by commentators studying this passage. So, after prayerfully considering this question through the lens of John's joyful life, I would suggest there may be a third reason why John asked Jesus from prison, "Are you the promised Messiah, or do we look for another?"

This third option depends entirely on the direct connection that we find in Holy Scripture between John the Baptist and joy. Therefore, as we consider a third reason keep the examples that we talked about earlier in mind. Biblical examples such as John leaping for joy in his mother's womb, being filled with joy at the sound of Jesus' voice, and how his joy was fulfilled by pointing others to Christ. Those verses each speak specifically of joy, but it's also important to note that they aren't the only passages a person could refer to in order to illustrate the joy that John experienced throughout his life. You could also point out the joy that he received through the knowledge that he was the one sent by God to "*prepare the way of the Lord*" (Matthew 3:3), or the joy that was his when saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29), or the joy that he knew when he baptized Jesus, saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Him like a dove, and heard God proclaim from heaven, "*This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!*" (Matthew 3:17).

In the Gospel appointed for today John is languishing in prison, yet as you can see Scripture provides countless examples of John's joyful life, and you may have noticed these examples all have one thing in common: Christ. John leapt for joy in his mother's womb because he was in the presence of Christ, he was filled with joy at the sound of Jesus' voice, and his joy was fulfilled by pointing others to Christ. In every example what we discover is the source of John's complete joy is not found in possessions, circumstances, or even the people that surround him. In every example the source of John's complete joy is one Person: the Person of Jesus Christ.

Our Lord and God is John's only source of joy, and it is this biblical truth and historical fact that leads me to consider the third possibility that John questioned Jesus not because of doubt, but simply to hear Him speak joy into the darkness of a first-century prison. We all know the power that our words possess. We've experienced the comfort of words spoken by those we love, and the book of Proverbs confirms the truth that our "*tongue has the power of life and death*" (Proverbs 18:21). If finite humans have the power to speak life and death, just consider the infinite power of the spoken Word of God. I don't think we can begin to fathom the joy that John experienced when Jesus told his disciples, "*Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are*

*cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them*” (Matthew 11:4-5). Through this response Jesus speaks joy into John’s life, and to the world, by once again definitively identifying Himself as the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the Very Word of God in the flesh, the One and Only Source of Complete Joy.

John the Baptist was a man who lived alone in the desert, dressed in rough clothing, survived on a diet that we can’t imagine, and whose life on this earth ended when he was imprisoned and beheaded, yet it is John who the Church places at the center of this service in which we light the candle of joy just days before our Christmas celebration. Much like preaching about the reality of hell on a beautiful Sunday morning, our service today makes no sense to a world that believes joy can be bought, wrapped, and placed under the tree, or that joy is found in the perfect car, house, or spouse, but for those who have ears to hear, John reveals the Divine, comfortable truth that complete joy does not depend on anything that can be taken from you. John’s life story is not a way to kill the joy of Christmas, his life story is a way for us to realize that just like him, you can have nothing in this world, yet *in Christ*, joyfully possess all things (2 Corinthians 6:10). This is the message of complete joy that the Word of God speaks to all who are “*in Christ*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). In this season of Advent may we hear and receive His Holy Word, and by following the example of St. John the Baptist, may our joy be *fulfilled* as we prepare the way of the Lord in our generation, by pointing the world to the One and Only Source of Complete Joy.