

**Isaiah 12:2-6**

(TFWS#2270)

**R: He has made me glad! He has made me glad!  
I will rejoice for He has made me glad!  
He has made me glad! He has made me glad!  
I will rejoice for He has made me glad!**

<sup>2</sup> Surely God is my salvation;

**I will trust, and will not be afraid,**  
for the LORD GOD<sup>[a]</sup> is my strength and my might;  
**he has become my salvation.**

<sup>3</sup> With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

<sup>4</sup> And you will say in that day:

**Give thanks to the LORD,  
call on his name;**  
make known his deeds among the nations;  
**proclaim that his name is exalted.**

<sup>5</sup> Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;  
**let this be known<sup>[b]</sup> in all the earth.**

<sup>6</sup> Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal<sup>[c]</sup> Zion,  
**for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.**

**R: He has made me glad! He has made me glad!  
I will rejoice for He has made me glad!  
He has made me glad! He has made me glad!  
I will rejoice for He has made me glad!**

Footnotes:

- a. [Isaiah 12:2](#) Heb for Yah, the LORD
- b. [Isaiah 12:5](#) Or this is made known
- c. [Isaiah 12:6](#) Or O inhabitant of

**THE NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE      *Philippians 4:4-7***

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Reader: The word of the Lord.                      People: ***Thanks be to God.***

**THE GOSPEL LESSON                      *Luke 3:7-18***

<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even 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.”

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

**Footnotes:**

- a. [Luke 3:15](#) Or *the Christ*
- b. [Luke 3:16](#) Or *in*

Reader: The Gospel of the Lord.

People: ***Praise to you, Lord Christ.***

Well, good morning, brood of vipers. Look out for that fire! Look out for that unquenchable fire! Yup. That's what we read this morning as our Gospel lesson, "Thanks be to you, Lord Christ." It's rather alarming, don't you think?

But, this year, I *wasn't* alarmed. I was actually filled with joy. As I read this scripture, a surge of joy shot through me that has been amazingly sustaining ever since. May I share it with you?

First, you'll need a little bit of explanation. Some context -- if you will -- to this amazing -- and I really do mean *amazing* -- scene. So, John is at the Jordan River, and folks from all around are coming out to be cleansed -- a new start. Life gets a little "complicated", sometimes we stray from our best selves -- you know what I'm saying? -- and John is offering a new start, a cleanse, a baptism -- to get things going right again -- not just for ourselves, but for our relationship with God.

This has caused quite a stir. At first, probably nobody came. Then a few. Then a bunch. By today, we're told a "crowd" was there. The desire of a few has become the yearning of the many.

So, John does what every good pastor does before offering a sacred gift to the masses -- he preaches! Now, if I stood here and hollered out to you this morning, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." Well, you'd probably walk out. Which is a culturally and temporally appropriate response. But back then, it was just good preaching. On a riverbank with no

microphone, he needed to get their attention. And he didn't have the bell of Dodd Hall.

People had come because they were fallible people who wanted to get a fresh start. John reminded them that they were God's people and that they had been sitting on their laurels. They had been saying to themselves, "We are descendants of Abraham. We're good to go. God is already our God just because we are descendants of Abraham."

Today, I would say the equivalent for some Christians would be, "I accepted Jesus as my savior; I can live however I want, because heaven is mine."

But John, this morning, is saying to his complacent Jews and our complacent Christians -- oh no! Uh uh! Don't just think that because you are children to Abraham, that you don't have to do or be anything else! As children of Abraham (and, may I add, as disciples of Christ) you are called to so much more. Leave your complacency behind! *Be children of God!*"

"Brood of vipers" got their attention just like it got ours this morning. "Don't rest on your laurels" got their attention just like it got ours. That ax that sits at the root of a tree is emphatically challenging each and every child of God from ancient times to now to produce fruit! That, if we are just here to soak up stuff for ourselves so that we can consume selfishly or greedily -- well, then we're not living our faith.

Have you found your joy yet? (lol!)

It's okay; I'm not done yet. Let me give us all a bit of joy before you all start exiting out the back door!

Here's the first piece of joy. It comes as the answer to a question and this is where my joy burst forth: Question: *Who* is gathered at the Jordan River? *Who*?

So often when we gather, we are a homogeneous group. We are either rich or poor. We are privileged or powerless. But on this day when John finally has "a crowd" gathered at the river, he has the pastor's miracle. He has what every pastor longs for with their deepest heart. Perhaps it is that this year, my deepest heart has been touched. Because, this year, I saw something I have never seen before; never experienced before; never realized before.

On this day, at the Jordan River, he has *all* gathered there -- and all means all. We hear him speak to the "children of Abraham" and we know that the poor and disenfranchised are there, but -- WHO ELSE?!!! The TAX COLLECTOR. And THE SOLDIER.

Conservative Christians with Progressive Christians. Democrats and Republicans. People of all races and nationalities. Compromised ability people and able bodied people. Straight people and LGBTQI people. All gathered at the river!

Joy. Sheer joy. They are all there, together! Wow! What an amazing, miraculous day of God! Joy. Sheer joy!

But, before he lets them get into the water and walk away feeling all good about themselves, he challenges them -- he calls them out. He say to them,

"Don't rest on your pedigree" and "don't think you have it done yet." He says, "Let your yearning, that led you out to this wilderness area to walk into (possibly chilly) water, be holy and life changing. Not just "a thing to do."

So now hear the crowd anew: "What then should we do?" they asked him earnestly.

"Whoever has two shirt must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same." Let me ask you this morning: how many shirts do you have? And how much food do you have? And is this a message for you?

But then -- when the TAX COLLECTOR asked his question, suddenly we should startle in our seats! This is NOT just the poor, oppressed and disenfranchised present, this is the OPPRESSOR in their midst; and they have - - if not welcomed them, at least accepted them. When the words of "you brood of vipers" breaks across the crowd, the tax collectors cry out: "Teacher, what shall we do." And John say, "Don't cheat them anymore."

And then the soldiers speak! "What about us? What should we do?"

John -- who we know as John the Baptist or John the Baptizer who lived on locust and honey out in the wilderness -- on this day captured in scripture almost 2000 years ago, engaged a gathering of the victims and perpetrators, the fools and the wise, and baptized them together.

Can you feel the miracle? Can you feel the gift?

So, when he begins as the prophet he has been called to be, he says to them, "people -- start bearing fruit -- because you can't rest on your lineage or your parent's faith. You can't be complacent. Because, the one who follow me is going to take a long, hard look at you..."

He's going to see you as wheat in the field. When you are harvesting wheat, the husk is irrelevant because it is inedible. So, when John says that Jesus will use a shovel that will "sift the wheat from the husks", he is saying that Jesus can strip off all of the unnecessary, inedible, cumbersome parts of you and throw them into a fire that can't ever touch you again. That's "Good New"!

Imagine with me a world where no one hid behind their masks, but simply cared for and loved their neighbor. Wouldn't that be amazing?

So...can you see the joy I found in this scripture? All of those people! Victims and perpetrators coming to John for a baptism of forgiveness. How powerful it must have been for the oppressed to find some of their oppressors also seeking forgiveness! How powerful it must have been even after they had been called a "brood of vipers" that they stood firm and maybe even shouted out, "We need to be forgiven." And have John say, "Then don't rest on your laurels as children of Abraham and therefore, children of God. Put your life where your mouth is, because, if you think I am something -- you have NO IDEA who is coming after me. Gird yourselves! It's going to be incredible!"

And, I believe, that many of those people that day felt joy! I know that John did! Because he knew when victims and perpetrators were arriving together for a blessing, that God was at work! As a prophet, what greater joy can you have

then to know that God is at work! To have the perpetrators ask: "What must I do?" Sheer joy!

Then, as the people were filled with expectation, he tells them about the Christ -- and it's almost more than I can bear. He says, the One who will baptize you -- not with water but the Holy Spirit -- will purify you. He will take the husk off of you -- the disguise you wear in this life, the facades and armor that you wear to protect yourself with in this bitter, unforgiving world -- he will take that husk...and throw it into an unquenchable fire so that you can live your life...as...you...were...made. As you were made.

That's not a fleeting happiness; that's a sustaining joy!

We look at our Hebrew Scripture reading where Isaiah says, "Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion," and we read Paul's letter to the Philippians and hear, "Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I say, Rejoice." And we think that we understand that immediately -- rejoice, have joy -- and that finding joy in the Gospel took some work.

But the truth is that Isaiah was telling people to rejoice who were living at a dangerous and tumultuous time of military and political upheaval; and Paul who wrote to the people of Philippi that they should rejoice, wrote those words from a rank prison cell. What sense does any of that make?!

How is it that Isaiah says to the people, ""Shout aloud and sing for joy" in the midst of relentless warring? How is it that Paul is joyful as a prisoner?

I don't know about you, but I have actually received dozens of letters from prison. They are all full of fear, of extreme boredom and lethargy, and of a list of requests from toiletries to fruit and vegetables. They are not, however, filled with the words "rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice."

Initially, we might have said that we "get" Isaiah's urging to shout aloud and sing for joy; and Paul's call to the Philippians to do likewise, was something we could wrap our brains around, too. But once you get the war-weariness and fear of the Israelites and the fact that Paul is writing from prison, suddenly we're all left saying, "what?!" How are these people -- so covered by grey cloudy skies -- able to speak words of joy? How is it even possible that they know joy!?

THAT is the right question this morning! Because, even if we can eventually see the joy of John the Baptist at the Jordan, the other scriptures tell us unequivocally that even in the worst of all situations, our response is to be joy. And that if we can sit in that joy -- oh, how wonderful life will be!

So, how do we have -- not just fleeting happiness -- but the enduring joy of Isaiah? And how do we have the enduring joy of Paul? How do we have the enduring joy of John the Baptist who certainly had happy days and unhappy days down at the river?

Let me offer you a story that might help. It's the story of a friend of mine who was a pilot -- like Amelia Earhart. She was teaching people to fly before her twentieth birthday -- which means she was a child.

She told me a story once of when 3 of the most popular boys of her High School approached her for a flight. And, because she wanted their acceptance, this unusual woman-child of the 1970s/1980s said yes. But it was a rainy day. It was grey, diminished visibility. This made it a bit more challenging.

But she loaded them in the plane anyway. They buckled in. She accelerated down the runway. She took flight into the rain. She arced hard upward. She flew with an ease in her voice but steel in her muscles until...she broke through the clouds...Above the gray and dreary day was sunshine and a blue sky. She said, at that moment they all burst into cheers. But it was the feeling that she had of sheer joy that she tells me has never left her. On her grey days, she remembers the blue sky above and she has joy.

Joy isn't the same as happy that lasts for days or a month or a season or a honeymoon. It's a knowing. That even when the world is drab and gray, or dark and shadowed, or dim or demolished -- that there still exists the blue sky above the cloud. Perhaps it's the closest reality we have to speak of eternity.

For any of you who have ever flown on a stormy day, you know this experience, too. Once you fly above the storm, blue sky always exists. Then, eventually, if you fly often enough, you know that even if you are flying in the storm, the blue sky still exists above you. That blue sky constancy is the closest experience I can express as "joy".

Christian Wiman who wrote a book about joy describes joy as "a flash of eternity that illuminates time". (Joy:100 Poems, A Note on the Selections).

People often use the words joy and happy interchangeably, but they are actually quite different in our vocabulary of faith. We seek happiness, we long for happiness; but happiness is fleeting. It's dependent on the situation or our mood, or someone else's mood around us.

Joy is something altogether different. It is an offering from God; it is an offering of grace. It's holding on to the blue sky of God's eternity on a cloudy day. Or in the midst of war. Or sitting in prison. Or living at a time of political turmoil. Or when you get bad news. Or when things aren't going well. Or when you are struggling.

It's a flash of eternity that illuminates time. An aha moment. A glimpse from God's view. A certainty of God's unconditional love and constancy in all seasons of our lives. A knowing -- not just on good days -- but on really hard days, that the hard day isn't everything. That it doesn't get to win.

C. S. Lewis wrote a book he called, "Surprised by Joy". And, I guess, that is what joy usually does. It often finds us -- or we find it -- inexplicably in a dark time. I pray you will be surprised by joy this Advent season. And once you've grasped it, hold on tight! So that every season of your life will be sustained by joy and shaped by joy and graced by joy.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.