

Good News to the People  
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**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.

**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 axe 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>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 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.

I said it just last week – recently we have been seeking out good news, wherever it can be found. Today, our second reading states outright that what we read is good news. If you feel like you must have spaced out and missed it, you are not alone. It doesn’t immediately sound like good news: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 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. Even now the axe 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.” I am grateful for the wisdom of others in times like these – Professor Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen rhetorically asks, “Is it not good news, *euangelion*, the gospel, to hear that a proper way to prepare for the Advent [the coming] of the

Humble Servant is to let the divine ax cut off our greed, self-indulgence, egoism, hypocrisy, and the like and throw them into the unquenchable fire of God’s judgment?”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this still is tough to swallow for it means admitting that we have greed, self-indulgence, egoism, hypocrisy, and the like to be cut off. If we can do that, then we are in the place of the crowds and the tax collectors and the soldiers in this reading. Our next question is “What should we do?” The meat of the good news from John, through Luke, follows. He exhorts them in these ways: Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise; Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you; Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages. I know these exhortations must be the good news because our reading closes by saying, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” Mariam J. Kamell of the University of St. Andrew’s sums up this good news, explaining: “Each group receives a practical answer: care for the needy and practice truth and justice.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul has his own exhortations to the Philippians. His are more hopeful than practical, yet just as necessary. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Does it feel like your list is getting longer, this list of things you must do to prepare for the Lord’s arrival? And how exactly are we supposed to rejoice in light of my earlier declaration that we are seeking good news wherever we can find it and in whatever size it may be, even the smallest? Pastor Allen Hilton brings this exhortation into God’s language, saying of all of us, “And so our weary Advent worshipers, not quite sure their [lives warrant] rejoicing, have their encouraging answer: Fear not! For the joy we celebrate today is anchored, not in bright circumstances but in Christ-aided direction of our minds toward joy, toward others, toward God in prayer, and toward God’s best things.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, this day when we light the pink candle in the Advent wreath, the candle of joy, God is not asking us to manufacture joy despite our current circumstances. The joy already exists, but not the same joy we might seek, the one that looks like happiness. This joy is God’s joy – the joy in the potential with which we were each created. Christ-aided direction points us to who and how we can be, which means lives focused outward, lives focused in prayer to God, lives watching for God’s goodness. This doesn’t necessarily sound like happiness, although happiness can certainly be found in a life like this. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “in a sermon in which he adapted the persona of the apostle Paul...addressed the problem of pursuing happiness rather than living the gospel.” He said, “The end of life is not to be

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.”<sup>4</sup>

This brings us back to John in the wilderness, doesn't it? John told the crowds and the tax collectors and the soldiers to care for the needy and practice truth and justice. I suspect for many this may feel not-so-daunting, as we go out of our way to do more in these areas around this time of year. That's a good thing. An even greater thing? That we keep it up, this going out of our way, throughout the year, as vigorously as we do in December. I know it takes extra effort; I'm certainly not claiming exemption from this exhortation. I need to hear this as much as the next person. We hear the words from John that God's winnowing-fork is in hand, to clear the threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into the granary; and the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire. If you don't keep at it with the same energy throughout the year, you do NOT become the chaff. No one person is the chaff, and no one person is the wheat. Last week we talked about the refiner's fire and fullers' soap drawing out the good from something which has both good and bad. The winnowing fork and the unquenchable fire do the same.

We each have wheat and chaff within us. The good news is that God can remove our chaff. We signal our willingness by living lives focused outward, lives focused in prayer to God, lives watching for God's goodness. In not-so-bright circumstances, we need even more so to be living these kinds of lives, not only so we continue to be directed toward joy but also so we can be part of directing others toward such much-needed joy. Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Let us pray: Joyous God, may your peace guard our hearts and our minds in your Son, whom we await. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 66.