

“The Inn – How Much Is Enough? (JOY)”

December 12, 2021 Advent 3

The Inn – Housing the Holy series

You’ve probably heard the song somewhere since holiday music started just after Halloween: *We need a little Christmas, right this very minute. We need a little Christmas now!* Get out the lights and decorations; a line in the song actually says, “We’re in a hurry!” We might feel that today. *Let’s just get to it.* Whether we’d like to get it over with, or if we’re anticipating a wonderful gathering, we push the coming of Christmas hard. *We need a little Christmas now!*

But this isn’t the season of Christmas yet; that starts right after Christmas Day. This is Advent, and it’s a time to prepare, to get ready, to clean house figuratively so that we can welcome Jesus, Son of God, Messiah, Savior, Lord, Emmanuel - God with us. It’s a time to clean up and clean out so we can house the Holy One of God. For the last two weeks, we’ve been challenged to make room and make space at the table - to understand that there may be some things we need to give up or fast from and some ways we need to get rid of that scarcity mentality that so easily becomes the norm for us - that there won’t be enough for us if we scoot over and let someone else sit.

Today we encounter John the Baptist - the quintessential Advent figure who literally says he comes to “prepare the way for the Lord.” He shows up in Advent, pulling no punches, kicking everyone in the rear, coming on the scene like a wild man whose been in the desert too long on a diet of locusts for protein and honey for carbs, wearing a camel’s hair coat, with a simple message: *Repent and return to God.* **SLIDE** - John the Baptist icon

I love John the Baptist. I said last week that John is sometimes the unwelcome guest that we don’t want to hear. Pastor Jim Harnish says, “We may not have invited John, but he comes to find us to get us ready for the coming of the One who can “change us from the inside out.” **SLIDE** - John the Baptist more modern

John the Baptist proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and the people come in droves to receive it! That’s the amazing part about John. Instead of singing “We need a little Christmas,” some would say we need a lot of Advent, and especially a lot of John the Baptist to tell us what we already know is true, but to tell us again anyway so that we pay attention.

After years of silence from God, God gives John a word to speak – a call to repentance and preparation because Jesus is coming to bring God’s peace. Gospel writer Luke places John within history. Go back in chapter 3, and we read that Luke names those in power in the Roman Empire; he names religious leaders, too. John isn’t

a fictional character. He is a man born into real time when people faced real challenges, and his prophetic work will get him into real trouble.

For first-century Palestinians, it was a difficult time in politics, religion, and economics. Does that sound familiar? For the Jewish people, there was little or no hope. No prophet of God had been on the scene for ages, and the Roman Empire was strong. No one was challenging its power.

But then John comes. He's not in the government. He's not part of the religious authority. He's a guy who's been on his own in the wilderness for a while, dedicated to God's work. But the people came out to hear him because they recognize God speaking through him. Despite the presence of earthly rulers and earthly authority, John is God's prophet with the message for the people. Isn't it just like God to come to the wilderness – the most unexpected place and use the most unexpected voice? But remember, it was John who leapt in his mother, Elizabeth's, womb when Mary came to visit.

John tells the people to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Sometimes we gloss over this, but it's a powerful directive. John wants them to know that their ancestry isn't enough; they can't simply claim a connection to Abraham and have everything be OK. Baptism by itself wasn't enough; God wanted them to have a change of heart and life.

To repent is to turn around and go a new way, and so real repentance has consequences. Repentance is not a quick or painless endeavor! One person describes repentance this way: to turn and look in the direction from which salvation comes and to do the work necessary to receive it when it comes." This is what God calls us to do in Advent. This is what John says - prepare the way!

If we really have a genuine change of mind, direction, or life, there are fruits that show through. There are changes in how we think, speak, and act. We accept the love of God in Jesus Christ, and when we let that love transform us from the inside out, we stop going against God and start walking with God. Good works are not something that we do to earn God's love because we can't earn it; we can only receive it as a gift. Our good works that give God glory show the love of God at work in us.

John is preparing people for Jesus' ministry. Jesus is the Messiah that God promises through the prophets, but Jesus doesn't come quietly, and neither does John. John calls the people to repent, and when they ask what to do, he tells them that repentance requires work from each of us. It's all these different groups that come to him - regular people, tax collectors, soldiers.

Religious connection doesn't ensure God's salvation. Rather, John says, we have to be willing to stand before God and look at ourselves. And we have to evaluate how we live in community with one another. Repentance has to show, John says, in our everyday behavior – how we live and work, act, and interact.

So, turn yourself around and get yourself in line with the righteousness of God. If you've got two coats, give one to a person who doesn't have one. If you have extra food, give that to someone who needs it. If you're a tax collector, collect no more than what is right. Tax collectors were known to take more than what they were supposed to - and pocket some for themselves. If you're a soldier, don't extort anyone by threats or false accusations. Don't harass people or abuse your power. That's righteous and ethical living, and you better start practicing it. That's how we prepare the way for the Lord.

We have to share, act fairly, be honest, and be content. John's preaching calls for radical social change - even still! Those tenets - share, act fairly, be honest, and be content - are still challenging. I felt the challenge this week.

I want to confess to you that I have too much stuff. The carpet in one area of the parsonage was replaced this week (thank you for caring for that space), and you know what happens when the carpet guy is coming. You have to move everything out to get ready. You have to move stuff out of closets. And when you move stuff out of closets, you see how much stuff there is. If you have two coats...

What about shoes? Blankets? How much is enough? John is offering very practical ways that people can do something to bear the fruit of change. He's talking about a balance of resources, having what we need (and not too much), and sharing what we have (and not keeping what we don't need). That's what changed hearts and lives look like. And it may be an easy thing to do in this month when we're focusing on giving and sharing, but what happens in March and April? It never fails that we feel that spirit right now, but people need help all the time. John's word isn't temporary, but a call to repent and keep on going God's way - seeking the well-being of everyone.

And if we really want to get mad at John, I wonder if he'd tell us that we're actually taking from others when we have too much for ourselves. I know that just went from preaching to meddling, as they say, but it's a word I needed to hear. When there are clothes I don't wear - some of the new - why am I keeping them? When I have more than enough, that's a problem that needs a heart change.

A seminary colleague of mine, Mike, wrote a poem this week wondering if the war on Christmas is more about how much we spend when there are people who don't have a place to sleep. His poem asked, "Can we hear this season where Isaiah says feasts and festivals are empty without mercy, justice, and compassion...?" And the poem ends with a reminder that "there is an invitation to honor God by seeking Justice, loving Compassion, and living with Humility." His words stood in line with prophets like John and those who came before to call us out on our obsession with having more and call us back to what matters.

You might ask how joy fits into all this? Perhaps it's a recognition that joy isn't

based on what we have, but comes from a deeper place of trusting in God and knowing that there is enough for us. And it starts with committing to simple acts - cleaning out, sharing, downsizing, finding contentment with less. Can we solve every problem? No. Can it be overwhelming to think about all of the needs there are? Yes, but we can make a difference in small ways that really matter.

And it's not just personally. We do it together as the church as we think about using space and reaching out in love and grace to others. Joy also drives us into relationship and community - not just looking out for ourselves, but caring about others and their well-being. We may experience joy in personal prayer, but joy also calls us to share more widely and witness to God's grace realized in our lives.

And remember that John is speaking to everyone who comes to him – not just certain folks, but everyone! It's a diverse group of people. Each of us has changes to make to be in a better, more fulfilling, and more righteous relationship with God. That's the challenge John offers every time we hear him in Advent. Each of us has to hear the John's words again: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." What answer would God give us if we asked that same question: what should we do? Perhaps it might be similar: share, act fairly, be honest, and be content. How do those simple tenets change us and change the world?

Today we focus on JOY – and even though joy may not be the first word that pops into your head when John the Baptist speaks, that's what the end goal is - joy in the Lord that comes from a place of deep trust and assurance in God's good and faithful care and God's promise to make a way for us in Jesus Christ. And that joy isn't seasonal; it doesn't end on December 26, but something that lasts. We don't find it in the stuff we have, but in the life we live as a gift of God. Joy sustains us in this season and after it. That's the promise Isaiah knew when he sang his song: Surely it is God who saves me. God is my salvation, and salvation brings a source of joy that doesn't run dry - a well that's deep and abiding.

Christmas is coming, but don't rush it. Advent is here, and we need to engage it. I hope we listen to John, even when we don't want to because we know he's right. How do we use what we have? What could we share with others? And how will our joy in Jesus increase in sharing, being fair, being honest, and finding contentment in God's abundance?

May God help us as we prepare the way for Jesus.

Let us pray...