

Revolutionary Joy

Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10

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First Central Congregational Church

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Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume 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 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. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Because in the wider culture it is already Christmas season, we often overlook that the biblical lessons for the first few Sundays of Advent are filled with darkness, doom, and gloom. The First Sunday of Advent is actually not about the first coming of Jesus, but the second coming, and the biblical lessons are about apocalypse and judgment. The second Sunday isn’t much better, as we get this cantankerous wilderness prophet John the Baptist speaking of judgement, righteounses, and fire and requiring everyone to repent of their sins. Not too many carols of the season include “burn with unquenchable fire” among the lyrics.

Yet this negativity is essential for Advent and Christmas to make sense. The birth of Jesus is not about warm sentimentality, as much as we all enjoy our warm sentimentality. It is about light in the darkness, blossoming desserts, the destruction of the weapons of war, in other words—the struggle between good and evil. So, you can't adequately prepare for the birthday of light and peace without spending some time waiting in the darkness.

Which is why we chose “Radical Joy” as our Advent theme. No seriously.

Early in the autumn I sat down to read the introductory essay of a new book of poems that had just arrived—*Joy: 100 Poems*, edited by Christian Wiman. Wiman is one of the leading Christian poets of our age. In 2017 he published this volume of 100 mostly contemporary poems about joy. So much contemporary poetry is focused on pain and injustice, and he wanted to elevate that joy is there too. He also was vividly aware that we live in deeply troubled times, and he writes about how many of his friends were suspect when he said he was working on a book about joy. But he decided now is precisely when we need joy.

Reading his introduction in the early autumn, that spoke to me. The message was reaffirmed a few days later when I listened to the podcast of Krista Tippett’s interview of Ross Gay who has also been writing about the need for joy, delight, and gratitude precisely at this time. Here’s part of what he said about joy:

I have really been thinking that joy is the moments — for me, the moments when my alienation from people — but not just people, from the whole thing — it goes away. And it shrinks. If it was a visual thing, like, everything becomes luminous.

And for Ross Gay that moment of connection with other people is usually a connection in our pain and our suffering and the reality that we are all going to die. That is the deep connection between us what he calls a “joy-ning” spelt j-o-y-n-i-n-g. Despite all that is wrong with us and with the world, we can connect to each other and work together to create life. Ross Gay says that is the source of our joy.

In the interview Krista Tippet got him to talking about the community garden he works with in Indianapolis and how the public space of the garden and the act of gardening are joyful. Here’s how Ross Gay describes it and how gardening makes his life better:

For one, it’s just fun to be in a garden, for me, dreaming about what could happen: that kind of mystical space, actually, of trying to figure out what this thing that I do here could be in five years, that kind of strange dreaming space that it is.

There’s also something really moving about putting a seed in the ground and it turning into something really different, and a lot of something really different and, potentially, on and on and on, a lot of something very different.

I’m crazy for smells, and a garden gives you smells. I’m nuts about that. I’m nuts about that.

And I know the soil makes you happy, too, put your hands in soil. We know that. There's many things.

To walk out your door and get a little food — I can go on and on about this.

What is joy? And is it different from happiness, delight, and pleasure?

The poet Yehuda Amichai says that we are blurry when it comes to joy. It is pain that our language is precise about. He wrote, "I want to describe, with a sharp pain's precision, happiness and blurry joy."

Rainer Marie Rilke wrote that "Joy is a moment." I always felt the opposite, that joy is a cultivated attitude toward life and that happiness is what comes and go. But I get what Rilke means. Maybe we are using one word to describe too many different things? The dictionary gives us three definitions: 1) "a condition or feeling of high pleasure or delight," 2) "the expression or manifestation of such feeling," and 3) "a source or object of pleasure or satisfaction." Joy, then, can describe the thing, the feeling, and the expression of the feeling.

Christian Wiman describes joy as "that durable, inexhaustible, essential, inadequate word." Indeed. Which is why he gives us 100 poems. Poets are the people with the vision and gift for language who might help us to better understand and better describe and better experience joy. Here's one of my new favourite poems from the book, entitled "From Blossoms" by Li-Young Lee:

From blossoms come
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted *Peaches*.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty, skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilance of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy

to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

Wow, I love that poem. Partly because I know that experience. Oklahoma, where I'm from, is a peach growing state. And to me there is no eating experience that is better than a fresh peach, warmed by the sun, eaten on the side of the road, bought from the farmer's fruit stand. And the juices run down your chin and drip onto your clothes and you have sticky hands afterwards. Nothing better.

In grad school every summer at the height of peach season, I'd round up a car load of friends, everyone had to bring along one song to share with the group, and we'd drive an hour to the peach orchards, buy our peaches, eat them, and then drive back. Sometimes other people thought this a silly waste of time. Yes, that was part of the point.

In preparation for a worship season of Radical Joy I finally read C. S. Lewis's memoir of his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, which is entitled *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis has a rather unique understanding of what joy is. For him it is something of a technical term he uses to describe "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." Joy is an experience that comes in a moment and is fleeting, leaving us some sense of loss but also the longing to experience joy again. He writes about the various times he had that experience—reading adventure tales and myths and walking among the hills are the primary ones. Joy is a by-product, that arises from our experience of something else (like being the by-product of eating a warm fresh peach). Lewis writes that if you aim for joy itself, you are missing the point and won't experience it.

What he came to realize over the course of his intellectual and spiritual development, is that joy itself was a sign, given to us by God, and pointing us toward God. For God is the true fulfillment of our longing, "the real Desirable," according to Lewis. So our experiences of joy are signs pointing us toward the true goal of our life.

John the Baptist comes preaching judgement and repentance for the reign of God is coming. But what does that mean? What is God going to do when God gets here? For that we need the vision of the Poet Isaiah: righteousness for the poor, equity for the meek, the end of wickedness. Peace will come to the natural order. Children will lead us. Children will play, which implies we all will. There will be no hurt or destruction. And knowledge will be everywhere. This will be glorious.

Isaiah is describing the revolutionary change that God intends for the Earth. This is a vision of a more just world. It is also a vision that delights us and fills us with joy.

Back in that *On Being* interview, Krista Tippet asks Ross Gay about the connection between justice and joy.

Ms. Tippett: I wanted to talk to you about justice and how you grapple with that reality, that aspiration, that concept. And there has been an evolution of that. You have brought together the idea of longing for justice and working for justice with also exalting the beautiful and tending to what one loves, as much as what one must fight.

Mr. Gay: Tending to what one loves feels like the crux. And I'm very confused about justice, I think. I feel like the way we think of justice is absolutely inadequate, often. Often. Not everyone. And I am curious about a notion of justice that is in the process of exalting what it loves.

Ms. Tippett: So here's something you wrote somewhere. You said, "I often think the gap in our speaking about and for justice, or working for justice, is that we forget to advocate for what we love, for what we find beautiful and necessary. We are good at fighting, but imagining, and holding in one's imagination what is wonderful and to be adored and preserved and exalted is harder for us, it seems."

John preaches judgement upon our sinful and troubled world. He calls for us to repent, to change our ways, to become righteous people. Righteous and just. And the justice he's working for, demanding that we work for, is God's vision of a peaceful, playful world that Isaiah has described for us. A vision that is wonderful and adorable that we should exalt and celebrate.

Joy is radical because it is a sign of the great Desirable—God. Joy is renegade because our troubled times want us to be cynical and despairing, angry and fearful. Joy is revolutionary because it imagines and insists upon a beautiful, wonderful vision of our future together upon this earth.

Resist the forces of cynicism and fear. Instead, "bite into the round jubilance of peach." "Put your hands in soil." Ask a one year old what joy is and laugh knowingly when "cookie" is the answer. Hold in your imagination what is wonderful. And rejoice at all the good things of God.