

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Road

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

The

Third Sunday of Advent (C)

December 16, 2018

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Making a list and checking it twice”

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 3:7-18

John the baptizer 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? 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 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.” And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 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.” As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Dear Lord, winnow us in our spirits now before it is too late. Amen.

We are in a season of giving, buying presents, thinking of what we didn't give last year, what someone else might like or even love. And we are a bit besieged by charities as well for end of year gifts.

“A local United Way office realized that it had never received a donation from the town’s most successful miser. So the person in charge of contributions called on him to persuade him to contribute. He said to the miser, “Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least half a million dollars you give nothing to charity. Wouldn’t you like to give back to the community in some way? The miser mulled this over for a moment and replied, “First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness and has medical bills that are several times her annual income? Embarrassed, the United Way

representative mumbled, “Um...,no.” The miser continued, “Or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?” The stricken United Way rep began to stammer out an apology but was interrupted. “Or that my sister’s husband died in a traffic accident,” the miser’s voice rising in indignation, “leaving her penniless with three children?!” The humiliated United Way rep, completely beaten, said simply, “I had no idea....” On a roll, the miser cut him off again, “So if I don’t give any money to them, why should I give any to you?” [Thanks to Pastor David Mosser, Graham, Texas, in “Sermon Mall”.]

John the Baptist confronted people at that most tender of places—at the point of their favorite sins. Those who flocked to John the Baptist in the wilderness were beset with many sins—tax collectors, soldiers, Pharisees and others. They all wanted rules to live by, ways to “put their houses in order,” so to speak. In answer to them John seems to supply each one with ways to repent of their sins and to live a godly life. It was a simple formula to win God’s favor and escape the fire of damnation.

Catholic Deacon W Pat Cunningham [on
December 13, 2018, St. Pius X Parish, San

Antonio, Texas 78209, Deacon (retired)]
writes,

“The problem with the word “joy”, is that the secular world gives a different definition to “joy” than the Christian should. For someone to whom this world of time and space and things is the primary reality, the word “joy” means “en-joy.” It is the world’s way of saying, “take pleasure.” “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” I recall a movie character talking about “sucking the marrow out of life.” Sensory pleasure controls such a mentality, and it is a dangerous one.

“The reason for this, of course, is that sensory pleasure is something that comes from outside us. My “feeling good” has a lot to do with whether I have money to afford such comforts—vacations, speedboats, food, drink and entertainment. It has a lot to do with whether I have strong health so that I can go out on an evening and indulge my desires and survive the night so I can wake up the next morning. “Feeling good” is a low level of joy, and if we indulge in the wrong sorts of “fun,” we could end up sick, or in jail, or even hospitalized or dead.

“No, joy must be experienced on a higher level. So, there are many who seek joy in

the company and adulation of other people. We seek awards; we work to accomplish things that will get our names in front of the public. We hang bling on our walls and our bodies. We want to be well thought of by others. That's a reason many people work hard at their jobs; that's also a reason people associate themselves with worthy causes that do good for others.

<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-essence-of-joy-as-we-prepare-for-the-savior-39-s-birth-w-pat-cunningham-sermon-on-joy-vs-pleasure-236274?ref=SermonSerps>

You possibly noted that the new candle that is lit in our Advent wreath today is the pink one. Does anyone know why we light a pink one on this Sunday? It is to show the lightening of the penitential season of Advent in recognition of the numerous appearances of the word, “rejoice” in our readings for today. Historically on this Sunday there was an Introit hymn sung called “Gaudete”, [gow-DAY-tay], the Latin word for “rejoice”, because the first word in the Latin version of that hymn is “rejoice.” The hymn was a musical setting for the Epistle lesson for today, as you can read on Page 3 of your bulletins, the Philippians

reading, that says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice.” Why on earth would Paul, the writer of the Epistle to the Philippians, want his congregations to “rejoice”? It was surely because he did not want his Christian followers to go around with dreary eyes and bowed heads, for indeed their Messiah had come and will come again and would save them from the wrath to come in the Last Days. They had nothing to fear but fear itself, to paraphrase the British Prime Minister during World War II, Winston Churchill. If we as followers of Christ are fearful of the future, then imagine how others who have no

assurance of an eternal life with God must feel. We are the people of hope, of assurance of things to come, so we have to model for others our confidence in Jesus our Savior. Rejoice! in the knowledge that our future has been secured by the shedding of Christ's blood for us on the cross. Rejoice that our sins have been forgiven. Rejoice that our names are written permanently in heaven. Rejoice, I say!

In this season of Advent, we need to be thinking of how we ourselves can find ways of turning our own lives around. A survey of the US population by the National

Opinion Center found that worshippers do one good deed only every 2.8 days on average. The average American however does one good deed every 3.3 days, about 15 percent less. And the average non-worshipper does a good deed every 3.8 days, about 25 percent less than the average worshipper. So worshipping God has a measurable difference, but of course we hope that would be the case! Maybe if we were more intentional about our worship activities we would do even better. The average church goer I have found attends only about once every three Sundays, in my experience. I am not sure exactly why that

is, but that is my observation. Advent is the season we can contemplate our shortcomings and resolve to do better, and even do better.

We too need to feel the joy of our faith in our hearts and in our minds and to show forth the joy in our hearts to others. We are to be the lights that lighten the darkness of others.

Someone has counted that there are 365 “fear not's” in the Bible, one for each day of the year. However, when a survey of American feelings was taken recently it was found that 64 percent believe there will be a

terrorist attack on the United States in the coming years; 63 percent believe there will be a major energy crisis; 56 percent believe there will be an epidemic worse than AIDS; 37 percent, three out of eight, believe that the United States will become involved in a nuclear war; and 31 percent believe that a huge asteroid will strike the Earth. So, in the midst of this rampant paranoia, it behooves us Christians to show forth our confidence that the Lord will not allow heaven and earth to pass away until he comes again with power and great glory. Our troubles will only last for a time, and

then the glory of the Lord will appear coming in the clouds.

Beth Johnson begins her sermon, “The Fruits of Transformation,” by asking the congregation why they are in church today. Why aren't they home baking “something chocolate and decadent,” etc.? She asks, e.g., if they came just to earn brownie points in the “Book of Life.”

Quickly she makes a transition to the gospel text and asserts, if John the Baptizer were here today, he would be calling some of the congregation, “hypocrites, snakes, insincere, or worse.” This kind of teaching

is hard to do—just ask John or Jesus—it may have cost them their lives.

Next, Johnson indicates what really caught her attention in this text: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people” (v. 18). How can John's “harangue” be good news, she asks? In brief, in a world too concerned about appearances rather than reality, “it is indeed good news to be invited to be honest and tell the truth about ourselves; to give up our pretenses and the smothering burden of our dishonesty and then still to be accepted and loved.” Johnson quotes G. K. Chesterson as

saying, “We are not really any good until we know how bad we are, or might be....”

[Beth W. Johnson, “The Fruits of Transformation,”

www.geocities.com/athens/styx/4291/blue297.html#dec141997

Rev. Ben Farley writes, “Theologian Paul Tillich likes to speak of the “inescapability of God.” God is inescapable. That is what makes God God. And therein lies our hope and salvation. That God is inescapable, even in our personal and national times of distress. That the inescapable God of the universe is not willing for us to go down in

forfeiture or inauthenticity. Neither for the Israelites, nor their enemies. The Lord, their God, is in our midst, despite their fallenness and failed grasp of their existence.’

[Rev. Ben Farley is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religion, Erskine College, in Due West, SC]

The Rev. Chris Slauch of Boston

University wrote:

‘I’m reminded of Paul Tillich's frequent use of the concept of “polarity”’: reality is most accurately and authentically construed through the tension of opposites. In Tillich's analysis, under the conditions of estrangement (i.e., sin), the poles tend to

become separated from one another: one may become preoccupied with evil to exclusion of goodness, or vice versa. The concept of polarity indicates that truth lies in the tension—or, if you will, in moderation. The passages for the day bring both themes to the fore.”

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/19/121618ee.html>

“Distinctively Lucan, however, is John's prophetic involvement in moral instruction as well as apocalyptic eschatology. Like the prophets before him, he did not hesitate to rebuke his audience in denunciatory speech.

Amos had addressed the wealthy women of the Northern Kingdom as ‘You cows of Bashan,’ Jeremiah had referred to Jechoniah as ‘a despised broken pot.’ Speaking out of this prophetic tradition, John reprimands the crowds coming to his baptism, ‘Generations of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’

“What, indeed, had motivated them to come to John for baptism? Very likely the fear of divine judgment! But how sincere is their repentance? Genuine repentance manifests itself in deeds of justice and love, and the evangelist Luke will present John

offering some concrete ethical exhortations to different groups of his contemporaries.”

-Herman C. Waetjen, professor emeritus of New Testament at San Francisco

Theological Seminary and the Graduate

Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/19/121618cc.html>

The Boston Globe, which carries a daily column designed to answer readers' queries, listed the top ten unanswerable questions.

Here is one: “I am nine years old and have a cat that eats regularly and needs to go on a

diet. He also eats mice when he is out. How many calories in a mouse?”

-David Mosser, Graham, Texas

[Sunshine Magazine possible source]

[And here is ‘the answer’: “The average mouse is about 30 calories. Cats need 20 to 30 calories per pound of weight per day, with snacks comprising no more than 10 percent. So if we were to look at a seven-pound cat, the caloric intake would be 210 per day. That would be about seven mice per day. That’s not permission to feed your cat mice, though. Just because they did it in the wild doesn’t mean they should today,

because mice carry diseases, worms and possibly poisons.’]

<https://familypet.com/how-many-calories-are-there-in-a-mouse/>

It is said that a chambermaid came to join the church at Bible scholar Charles Spurgeon's Metropolitan Temple in London. When asked for evidence of her sincerity, she said, “Now I sweep the dirt out from under the rugs, rather than put it there.” It's an answer that would have pleased John the Baptist. Do you think it would please Jesus?

A writer said, my 90-year-old grandmother, ‘Gagi told me of something that had happened to her that day. ‘This morning, your uncle was upset and angry with me over something I had done. I didn't even flinch. I received his anger, wrapped it in love and returned it with joy.’ Her eyes twinkled as she added, “It was even kind of fun, and his anger dissolved.””

<http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/19/121618e.html>

The story has been told of Abraham Lincoln who worshiped each and every Wednesday when in Washington D.C. at

New York Presbyterian Church near the White House.

One Wednesday evening as Lincoln was leaving the service, one of his assistants asked him: “Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon tonight?”

Lincoln responded, “The content was excellent, and Dr. Gurley spoke with great eloquence. It was obvious that he put a great deal of work into that sermon.”

“Then you thought it was a great sermon, Mr. President?” the assistant asked.

“No, I did not say that.”

“But Sir, you said it was excellent sermon.”

Lincoln replied, “No, I said that content was excellent and that the preacher spoke with eloquence. But Dr. Gurley, on this night, forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great.” [iv]

[iv] McCarthy, Dan, "Great Leadership" Newsletter, February 10, 2011.

http://day1.org/4400-getting_there

“The call to repent is like the man who stepped on the scales in the middle of the holidays to see the scales said that he had gained ten pounds. He refused to accept what the scales were saying until he stood before the mirror and thought, ‘Now I see

it.’ The start of repentance is to see the need and once we see the need to act upon the new reality.

John's call is not only a call to awareness, but it's also a call to live out of that awareness.

“Let us stop hearing the good news as bad news. Too many times when we hear the call to repent, we focus on what we turn away from, what we have to give up or let go of, instead of what we gain. We gain the joy of sharing what God has blessed us with. We hear the call to commit our will to God's

will thus avoiding cheap grace. We are challenged not to allow our faith to slip into merely good advice but to remain good news for all. We stop relying on a false security and find the power of God in our lives. We grow in our faith. We will no longer gloss over our shortcomings, but we'll deal with them in an open and honest manner.”

-by The Rev. Dr. B. Wiley Stephens (2009)

who was senior minister of Dunwoody
United Methodist Church in Dunwoody,
GA.

http://day1.org/1611-repent_ye_saints

Advent is upon us, challenging us, calling us to reform, repent, turn back O man and forsake thy foolish ways. What can we do today, this week, this season that will be great in the eyes of God, showing that indeed we have heeded John's call to all of us.

Amen.

Description:

John the Baptist's message of repentance calls to practical measures, good deeds, loving kindness. As Christians can we not excel in doing such deeds this season, and always?

Tags:

John, Baptist, Jesus, God, Christ, good, deeds, message, fear, Abraham Lincoln, Tillich, Boston Globe, Advent, joy, enjoy, rejoice, White House, United Way, reform, repent, cat, mice, calories

St. Raphael's Episcopal Church

1520 Route 88

Brick, New Jersey 08724

The Third Sunday of Advent (C):

December 13, 2015

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Bitter medicine?”

DRAFT

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 3:7-18

Refine us, O Lord, that we may be powerful instruments of your love for others. Amen.

John the Baptist's message would agree with the theology printed on a young man's T-shirt several years ago. The front read "Jesus is coming soon..." And the back side said "And, boy, is he ticked!"

"A local United Way office realized that it had never received a donation from the town's most successful miser. So, the person in charge of contributions called on him to persuade him to contribute. He said

to the miser, “Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least half a million dollars you give nothing to charity.

Wouldn’t you like to give back to the community in some way? The miser mulled this over for a moment and replied, “First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness and has medical bills that are several times her annual income? Embarrassed, the United Way representative mumbled, “Um...,no.” The miser continued, “Or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?” The stricken United Way rep began to stammer out an apology but was

interrupted. “Or that my sister’s husband died in a traffic accident,” the miser’s voice rising in indignation, “leaving her penniless with three children?!” The humiliated United Way rep, completely beaten, said simply, “I had no idea....” On a roll, the miser cut him off again, “So if I don’t give any money to them, why should I give any to you?”

[Thanks to Pastor David Mosser, Graham, Texas, in “Sermon Mall”.]

Arturo Toscanini, the famous conductor, got his big break when the conductor of the orchestra in which he was playing was

sidelined due to illness. Arturo was extremely near-sighted and unable to read the music while standing on the conductor's podium, but he had committed the entire movement to memory. And when he was called on to lead that orchestra, he was able to conduct both from his memory and from his heart, and the performance was the best ever heard. Arturo Toscanini's name was immediately made famous. He could feel the meaning of the music in his heart as well as in his mind, and he led the other musicians to be of like mind and heart.

[from "LectureAid"]

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confidence that the Lord will not allow heaven and earth to pass away until he comes again with power and great glory. Our troubles will only last for a time, and then the glory of the Lord will appear coming in the clouds.

Reverend Patricia Vanderpol sent her very appropriate personal Advent story by way of the internet a few years back. When she was pastoring First Presbyterian Church in Vandalia, Missouri, about an hour and a half from St. Louis, she made the requisite trip to the area mall in St. Louis to finish her Christmas shopping. She says she felt she

was really on top of things and organized to the hilt. Patricia was armed with her credit card, detailed lists, and a full tank of gas. She ate lunch in a Chinese restaurant at the mall, and went over her shopping list. She felt fabulous, on top of the world: she was nearly finished; everything was under control; she could see the accomplishment of her tasks soon ahead. After lunch she got the last things on her list and felt the weight of the world lift from her shoulders--we hopefully also will know that feeling by the end of Advent, God willing. Snowflakes were just starting to chase around, and on the way back driving back home she said

she was singing Christmas carols at the top of her lungs--pure joy. Then she stopped at a big variety store in Troy, Missouri, on her way home. She went in to do her usual shopping--lightbulbs, toothpaste, scotch tape, those sorts of things. Then Patricia Vanderpol writes: "As I entered the [store], I saw three scruffy kids, apparently on their own. The oldest girl was perhaps nine, the middle one, a boy, of maybe five, and the other was probably a three year old. They were coatless, none too tidy, and looked cold. I went on my way, tossing items in my basket, near a back corner of the store, when I saw the children again. They were

counting out their money on a box. Lots of coins. I smiled to myself, [she writes,] and went on my way.... Finally my list was finished. Now I was really finished, and I was flying high. At the check stand, the line was long, and I found myself behind the three kids. They had a short-sleeved t-shirt top—probably a Christmas present for their mom, obviously taken from the last summer clearance sale rack. Finally it was their turn at the check stand, and they placed the [t-shirt] top on the moving belt [of the checkout lane]. The clerk scanned the item, never made eye contact with the children, and stated the purchase price. The oldest

girl dumped all their money on the counter, and the clerk began counting it. Only a couple of crumpled dollar bills, the rest coins, mostly small ones. Nearing the end of the coins, still never looking at the children, she called her supervisor over. The clerk said, 'How do I void this sale?' They're short.' [Patricia Vanderpol writes,] I could feel the embarrassment and fear of the little girl. No present for mom, what would the clerk do to them--humiliation. I asked the clerk how much she needed and was much less than a dollar. Obviously, the children hadn't figured the sales tax. [Rev. Patricia continued,] I was furious with the

clerk for her rudeness. Where was her Christmas spirit, anyway? I handed the clerk a dollar bill, and she made the change, handing it to the girl. The little girl tried to give it to me, and I told her to keep the change and have a merry Christmas. I was so angry with the clerk. All the way home, Christmas carols were the last thing on my mind [Patricia writes]. I kept thinking I should have talked to the manager of the store. I should have reported that terrible clerk. My Christmas mood was utterly ruined. That night at supper [Patricia] recounted the whole fiasco to [her] husband and kids. [She continued,] “That night

tossing in bed, going over my Advent John the Baptist sermon, it hit me like a ton of bricks. All of my self-righteousness, all of my control over my own ability to get myself ready for Christmas, flew away like powder snowflakes in a gale. [Patricia said to herself,] No way do I get my list complete and say, ‘OK, I’m ready; let’s celebrate.’ Before God, I’m always (some change or) a dollar short. I am those three scruffy children. And that poor, tired clerk. What right did I have to judge her? God have mercy.”

If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? In other words, is the way you live your life day by day decidedly different from a heathen or an atheist or an agnostic?

One of the old camp songs says it best:

“They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

It doesn’t get much simpler than that. The Letter of James puts it this way:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if a man says he has faith, but has no works? Can faith save him?

And if a brother or sister is naked and in
lack of daily food,
and one of you tells them, ‘Go in peace, be
warmed and filled;’ and yet you didn't give
them the things the body needs,
what good is it?

Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead in
itself.

Yes, a person will say, “You have faith, and
I have works.”

Show me your faith without works,
and I by my works will show you my faith.”

(James 2:14-18)

John's listeners got it right. They didn't ask, "What shall we say?" or "What shall we think?" or "What shall we believe?" or "How should we feel?" They asked, "What shall we shall we do?"

Henri J. Nouwen wrote in *The Wounded Healer*, "God needs to guide us out of the closed circuits of our groups into the wider world of humanity."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns in his book, *"The Cost of Discipleship"* about cheap grace. In Bonhoeffer's words, "Cheap grace

is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, and grace without Jesus Christ.”

Peter Marshall, a noted pastor of the middle of the twentieth century and chaplain to the US Senate, saw Christianity starting as good news, but then he said we have allowed it to become diluted into merely good advice.

Jan and I watched the recent movie, “Interstellar” Friday night on television. Near the end of the movie the main character, an astronaut, is seen and heard talking to his big non-human metallic 6 foot

tall personal robot who is about to go with him on an interstellar journey. He is holding a screwdriver as he was adjusting the robot's "honesty" setting this time to be less than one hundred percent. At about sixty percent, the robot began to tell a joke, "Knock, knock," and then the astronaut said, "maybe fifty-five percent would be better." John the Baptist's problem was that he was dialed way up to around ninety percent or more in honesty. The coming Messiah would indeed ultimately separate the grain from the chaff, but before that, he would try to love all of us into becoming his followers. The threat of a violent final end for non-

believers was only very, slightly occasionally on his lips. Most all of the time he was telling us to love others as we love ourselves, and first of all to love God with all our heart, mind, and spirit.

Sometimes the truth needs to be sugar-coated a bit in order for us to take it in. And that also often works for life in general.

Amen.