

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

December 15, 2024

Sermon Title:

THE CANDLE OF JOY

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: *With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

The third candle of the Advent season is the candle of joy, and it might seem a little strange that the lectionary for this morning – the morning of joy – would offer us these somewhat joyless verses from the Gospel of Luke, verses in which John the Baptist is threatening some Pharisees with an evil fate and offering what seems like practical moral guidance to several different professions, and then concluding with what sound very much like a prediction about someone who is to come after him, someone who will be of considerably greater status or substance than John himself. And that's all well and good, but what does any of it have to do with joy?

John the Baptist was, of course, what we call a prophet, so maybe we can find a way into this puzzle by first taking a closer look at one of the other prophets the lectionary points us to this morning. Let me read again the first two verses from the selection from the prophet Isaiah:

12:2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

12:3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

There are two events that frame this prophesy, one occurring hundreds of years before Isaiah, and the other hundreds of years after.

The first was the event that occurred among the people of Israel while they were fleeing from Egypt through the desert. You'll remember that at one point, they became very thirsty and began to grumble, and Moses in exasperation turned to God and asked what he was supposed to do with this stiff-necked people. God responded by commanding him to take the elders of Israel along with his miracle-working rod, and to go to the rock, 'and the Lord shall stand upon the rock before thee and them, and the water shall flow forth.' It was not the rock, nor the rod, nor Moses and the elders, but the presence of God that provided the water the people required.

That was the ancient image Isaiah had in mind when he wrote his prophesy: "with joy you will draw water from the well of salvation." Speaking to the Jewish nation of his time, he was borrowing a much earlier story of God's salvation and using its imagery to reassure the people of his own that God would once again prove to be the well-spring, that God would provide the living water for their salvation.

During the centuries after Isaiah, that prophesy was incorporated into one of the rituals associated with the holiest feast of the Jewish nation, the Feast of Tabernacles. That was a feast in which all the people dwelt for a week in tents made of leaves, in order to remind them of the time when they were wanderers in the wilderness; And there was a very important ritual associated with this celebration: on each of the days of the Feast of Tabernacles, at a given point in the ceremonial, the priests went from the temple, winding down the rocky path on the temple mountain, to the Pool of Siloam in the valley below, and there in their golden vases they drew the cool sparkling water, which they bore up, and amidst the blare of trumpets and the clash of cymbals poured it on the altar, whilst the people chanted the words of Isaiah, 'With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.'

That ceremonial had been going on for every year for seven hundred years since Isaiah's time; and once more the period came round when it was to be performed; and on the seven days of the feast, punctually at the appointed time, the procession wound down the rocky slopes, drew the water in the golden vases, bore it up to the temple, and poured it upon the altar; and on the last great day of the feast, the same ceremonial went on up to a given point; and just as the last rites of the chant of our text were dying on the ears, there was a little stir amidst the crowd, which parted to make way for him, and a young man wearing rough country clothing, stepped forward, and there, before all the gathered multitudes and the priests standing with their empty urns, symbol of the impotence of their system,

‘on the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’ (John 7: 37).

And there it was: the true fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy. This young man from Nazareth, stood before the people and cried out to them: “I am the true meaning of Isaiah’s words. I am the water of life. If anyone desires life, let that person come and drink of me! With joy you shall draw water from me!”

C.S. Lewis once wrote that, based on the things Jesus said about Himself, he had to be either a madman or a devil or the Son of God: His words don’t leave any other alternative. And I think this is as good an example of that as you will find. Standing before people who recognized that he was invoking Isaiah’s image of the well of salvation as representing God, He cries out: I am the well of salvation.

Either a madman, or a devil, or the Son of God. Everyone has to choose.

But to come back to our gospel reading for today, I think this also helps us to understand why the lectionary gives it to us on the day we celebrate the joy of God’s great gift to His creation.

Standing before that great crowd on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus was saying that he, the carpenter from Nazareth, born in a manger, that he was the true meaning of everything the prophets had intuited about God from the beginning. He took their statements of greatest spiritual clarity, and applied them to Himself, and in so doing, he made a new sense of the world.

John the Baptist was the last of the prophets, and he represented as well as he could the intuition that something was coming, something that would change everything, something that would at last reveal God with clarity, not through image and shadow.

Groping for words to express his intuition, he spoke of the one to come as someone whose sandals he was not worthy to remove.

When Jesus did come, he bowed and removed the sandals of His disciples.

John intuited someone who would distinguish right from wrong, God’s truth from all the lies told about God, and he used the image of the winnowing fork, and the chaff burning in fire.

When Jesus came, he dined with prostitutes and tax collectors, and said they would be the first to enter the Kingdom. His winnowing fork separated the chaff, but only because the chaff requires special attention and care, as do all of us.

Soaked in the mindset of the old way of thinking, John, the Baptist of water, imagined a Messiah who would cleanse with the Holy Spirit and fire.

But when the true Messiah came, he turned water into wine, he offered His spirit as a Comforter, not a judge. And the fire he offered was not the fire of destruction, but rather of purification.

This all sounds very churchy, I know, but bear with me. What I'm suggesting is that the joy of Christ's advent provides, the joy that God entering into human history imparts, is the joy of realizing that we are all flawed, all broken, all much less than we should be, but that God loves us nonetheless.

The Old Testament God who would have rejected us and punished and held us to account, is not the God revealed to us by God Himself, incarnate. Our God, the true God, is what those old writers intuited, but were unable to describe. Our God, the true God, is endlessly loving, endlessly forgiving, and forever on our side.

John the Baptist was the final representative of a certain way of thinking about God, a way which, except for a privileged few, held neither joy nor anything related to joy.

But the new revelation, the new testament, gives us this blessed assurance:

I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke 7:28b-35)

And if that's not a reason for our joy, I don't know what is.

And so our prayer this morning is one of praise and gratitude. We praise you, Jehovah, creator of heaven and earth, King of kings and Lord of lords, for being who you are; and we thank you, Father, for Your unfathomable gift of yourself to each one of us, the well of living water from who we all have eternal life, your Beloved Son and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we offer this prayer of heartfelt joy.