

Repeat the Sounding Joy: Loving Joy
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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December 22, 2019

Isaiah 11: 1-10, Matthew 3:1-15

You may not think that I notice it there's a subtle dance that takes place on Christmas Eve, but I do...

Will, can you play the second verse of Joy to the World for us?

Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy

Who bobs their head, like it's some kind of pep rally, when you hear the closing lines of the verse? In fact, I think if I passed out pom-poms to some of you, we'd really get this Meetinghouse rocking!

Advent should be like a pep rally for Christmas! Four weeks of pumping ourselves up for one of our most holy days. But John the Baptist is a pretty unlikely cheerleader. I tend to imagine he looks like a Survivor contestant, wind-blown and disheveled after years in the wilderness. He's a little quirky with his diet of locusts and wild honey, which is even more bizarre than, say, putting pineapple on your pizza! And yet, this is the prophet sent to lead the pep rally for the amazing changes God is about to make in the world.

"Happy Advent! You brood of vipers!" Not quite the feel-good message we might expect. But such a jarring image might be what we need. Advent is a time of getting ready, a time of examination of ourselves, our hearts, to make our insides just as ready as our neatly decorated Meetinghouse.

And here is John the Baptist calling us to "keep our head in the game", to remind us of what is at stake. For John, the coming of the Lord is more than just a call to celebrate – it's a call to shift our lives in a way that allows us to live in the new kingdom of God that is coming.

John preaches a message of Repentance. It is a call of change, not just subtle recalculating, but a complete u-turn. It's as if John is trying to point out the rising sun on the horizon, but everyone is facing west. And even though the prophets who came before him have consistently told them to look east, God's people are stubborn and have become fixated in the other direction. So here comes John, barreling in to literally help turn the people of God around so that they can see the light of the new coming day.

And what we know about John the Baptist is that his message caught on. Maybe some in the crowd showed up for the spectacle, but others took his message to heart, confessing their sins and receiving the waters of baptism in the Jordan River.

Perhaps the time was right for them to finally hear John's words of warning. Maybe he spoke at the start of a new year, when people were looking for a resolution to make that would change their lives. Perhaps they were simply weary of the way the world was going and welcomed the call for change. Maybe they were grateful for a voice that was bluntly honest in a way that truly resonated with them. I think the people of God, much like us today, were longing for a new direction. And in that longing, they were able to hear John's message as one not of dismissive condemnation, but of love.

For some, this is a peculiar text for us to read on the last Sunday of Advent. It reminds us that God's love is deep and abiding love and extends to us even when we are at our worst, and facing in the wrong direction entirely. In fact, that's a central point of Christ coming into the world – to show us God's love firsthand, in and amongst the messiness of our everyday lives.

I don't know about you, but when I run out of time before visitors come, I reach a point in my tidying up that I start to, well, "hide" things. That pile of papers I don't have time to sort through? It can just get tucked away in that drawer. The boots that are drying out by the back door? Maybe they can fit in that closet. When I hide the stuff away, my house looks better, and unless our guests open all the closets, no one will be the wiser.

In many ways, this is how many of us want to spend these past few weeks. We want to get a little taste of the good news of Christmas, say "aww" at the sweet little baby in a manger, and then go on our way with a little extra spring in our step. We don't really want to tackle hard theological points, just the heart-warming ones. Keep it simple, preacher, and we'll just stuff those big questions into the closet where they belong and maybe come back to deal with when we have more time.

In the tv show, Friends, the character of Monica was notoriously neat and organized, in an almost too-good-to-be-true kind of way. One episode features her husband Chandler, asking about storage space behind a mysterious locked door in their apartment. She panics, and we soon learn that's because it is full, floor to ceiling, of "stuff." But you know what? When he finds out, Chandler wraps her in his arms and reminds her that he loves her, even if she isn't as perfect as she tried to make herself look. His response to finding out about all her junk, is love!

John proclaims that the kingdom of God is near. It's coming. Before we have time to get everything hidden again. The doorbell is ringing. Are we ready to open the door? John the Baptist calls us to fling open those junk drawers and crammed closets in our lives and sort through our stuff so that we can truly be ready and have a clear path for the one who is to come.

We live in a world where precious few things come without strings attached, and the mantra of "*if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is*" makes us rather cynical. We'd rather hedge our bets on a variety of options rather than fully buy into such absurd promises or hopes, lest we end up hurt and disappointed.

But Advent is our pep rally. No matter what we're up against, it's a time for us to believe that anything is possible as we look forward to celebrating that God can and will make a way, even in the darkest of times. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen!