



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Tidings of Happiness Joy

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 3:1-18

December 12, 2021 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

To find John the Baptist, you had to trek out to the wilderness. Despite this inconvenience, John drew some crowds. A strange collection of followers. Tax collectors, soldiers and regular folks like you and me. They were drawn to him. There is no evidence in the text that John ever took a course in Stephen Ministry or its practice of compassionate caregiving. John begins his sermon by calling his wilderness congregants a brood of vipers. You sons of snakes! Think about it. When is the last time I called you a brood of vipers? It's been months. And he tells them that Jesus is coming with a winnowing fork in his hand to root out all the ruffraff and to burn the chaff in unquenchable fire. Fire is not enough for John; it has to be unquenchable. Makes you wonder why folks went to all the trouble to go out to hear him.

And then, as if Luke hadn't been paying attention, in the next verse, he writes, "With many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news." Good news? Did you hear good news in there? I don't think John made a lot of people happy. I don't. But maybe that's not why people went out to hear him. Maybe they were looking for something a little different than happiness. On this Sunday, when we light the candle of joy, I can't help but wonder if the folks who tramped out to the wilderness were searching for some joy in their life. After all, in this season, we say tidings of *joy*, not happiness. Now you might be thinking: joy and happiness are the same thing. I used to think so, but I see them a bit differently now.

See if this makes sense to you. We find happiness when things go well in life. When we pass the test. When our Christmas shopping is completed. When we get a job, or even do a job well. When a friend comes to visit. When a meal is delicious and a moment of good conversation. These as well as

sunsets or getting glimpse of the neighborhood owl or harvesting a delicious tomato from the garden... all of these can provide a sense of happiness, even a deep sense of satisfaction with life because life is a series of blessings. This is a good thing. Happiness is a good thing. But it can also be fragile.

Because life is a mixed bag—a collection of beauty and brokenness. Sometimes no matter how hard we try, life gets derailed, storms come. We can't be happy all the time.

I read a few Facebook posts early this morning coming from Kentucky. Among others, from Mayfield, KY, a small town on the Ohio River. First Presbyterian Church, an old historic church... their building was destroyed in a matter of moments. Photos show it was decorated with a Christmas tree in their sanctuary and they had a dinner with music in their fellowship hall last week, but none of that is there anymore. I don't know what they will do today. Maybe some of them will stand around the rubble, light a candle, if they can find one, and remind themselves that joy is possible.

Life can kick you in the gut. Many days will be happy ones, but not all of them.

And for me—see if this rings true for you—for me, the hardest ones, the most difficult days, are not the days of tragedy or days that bring bad news because so many days are like that. For me, the hardest days are the days when I have disappointed myself or when I have stumbled and hurt or disappointed someone else. Oh, those days are the worst.

If I understand it, I think that's what led folks to seek out John the Baptist. John sounds like he has an anger-management problem, but the truth is, John is a man of hope, and I think, joy. Because John trusts that repentance was possible. To our modern ear, "repent" sounds like a harsh word. As in: Get your

act together or unquenchable fire awaits. But even in John's wilderness days, repent meant that change was possible. That tomorrow could be a new day. If I understand it, John said: God has a purpose for how you should live. And living the life that God intends is a deep source of joy. It may not make you happy all the time, but it will make you joyful.

Last Sunday we said that a source of joy for people of faith is the recognition that the love of God pursues us, the love of God finds us and will not let us go. If I understand it, John teaches us that holy love does not stay with us, but fills the spaces between us and the world around us.

I've shared with you an interview I heard years ago. A guy named Rob was on the plane that crashed into the Hudson River. Do you remember? Rob Kolodjay was on that flight with some buddies and he said when the plane engines went silent and the plane began to drop from the air, he had two thoughts. The first was, "I will be dead in thirty seconds." The second was, "I hope I did what I was supposed to with my life."

There is another question—maybe a more common pursuit: I hope I get to do what I want to with my life. I hope I can fill my bucket list. I hope I get to do what I want to. But Rob's question was different and deeper: I hope I lived my life in a way that I did what I was supposed to.

Do you know what you are supposed to do with your life? Oh, I don't mean are you supposed to be a teacher or a hair stylist or a scientist in a lab. I mean, do you know who you are to be as you encounter the world around you?

In short, John says: I have some good news. God wants us to live in a certain way in this world and none of us gets it right all the time. We are on again, off again; we miss the mark. We struggle to be faithful. But John says: The good news is that God is sending us an example. God is sending Jesus not only to show us who God is, but to show us who we are—who we are to be. Jesus shows us what our life is for.

And if Jesus is to show us what we are supposed to do with our lives, then it is worth noticing this: I don't know if Jesus was always happy. His days were

hard because he was constantly surrounded by the poor and the sick and the ones the world had passed over. And he was constantly being criticized and no one likes that. He was criticized for who he talked to. He certainly was criticized for who he ate with. And all sorts of folks challenged him for not practicing his faith the way folks thought he should. So he, like all of us, couldn't have been happy all the time. But I think he was joyful... the kind of joy that comes from knowing that he did what he was supposed to with his life. He lived his days in a way that pleased God.

For us, that comes in fits and starts. None of us get it right all the time. But for all of us, at least if John can be trusted, we can get it right some of the time. And the call of John is to lean into that.

It's a life of generosity. It's a life of seeing the beauty in others. It's a life of deep sacrifice and simple kindness. And it is a source of joy.

I want to share something with you that I think expresses joy. Melanie Mendrys is a friend and member in this church. She, I am sure, has not been happy all the time, but she is a joyful person. And she and her daughter, Meredith, figured out a way to share that joy with their 93-year-old neighbor. It was captured on the national news. Take a look.

When we love our neighbors, we are willing to sacrifice a bit. We are even willing to suffer a bit. We are willing even to endure the Hokey Pokey, if it makes someone joyful. When we allow the holy love that has found us to ooze out and fill the spaces between us and our neighbors, it matters. And we will have done what we were supposed to with our days. Jesus was betting that, in time, we would be willing to go the second mile, turn the other cheek. Give and forgive. To take up our own cross. Many days will be happy ones but not all. But even the hard days can be joyful. Happiness comes when life is good. And that's a good thing.

But joy can carry us through even on difficult days because joy is rooted in the confidence that the love of God can be trusted no matter what comes. John teaches that we can share that love and when we do, we have done what we are supposed to do with the day. And that leaves us with a deep and abiding joy.