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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 15, 2018
3rd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 3:7-18
Sermon Title: “Hope for God's Joy”

Theme

John the Baptist heralds the mighty one “who is coming.” John teaches that preparation for God’s reign is not a matter of identity but of bearing fruits of merciful justice, radical generosity, and vocational integrity.

Text

⁷John 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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers 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.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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.”

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Sermon

For more than a month, I have wondered how this Advent series was going to play out. As you know, the overall theme is "Hope" and more specifically, on Advent 1 was "Hope for God's Presence." That worked.

On Advent 2 the theme was, "Hope for God's Peace" and given the local news of the GM announcement, that was a little more difficult, but the Lord was faithful and a good message was delivered.

But for more than month, as I said, knowing that the Advent 3 Gospel Reading features the fire and brimstone of John the Baptizer, I wondered how God would turn John's message into the theme for this weekend, "Hope for God's Joy" because I think it could be argued that John's message lacks obvious joy.

Then I came in to my study Saturday morning and for some reason was confronted with a video that I would like to share with you, that in the end, says what I want to say. I'll say more on the other side, but for now, watch this video, and let me warn you now to get your tissues out and ready.

Video:

God's Got This: The Legacy of Chelsie Watts

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=672&v=oAGsV_mtCSs

So I'm sorry/not sorry to make you watch that video so close to Christmas on a weekend when we are supposed to be celebrating the "Hope for God's Joy" but if my reason isn't obvious to you, allow me to explain it a little more.

Speaking in general terms, I believe that we, in our western American culture, have accomplished so much, and have so many resources, and have access to almost anything we can desire, at any time, that I believe that we have essentially left God out of our lives.

Oh sure we come to worship on the weekend and sing some songs and say some prayers, but frankly, when we pray to God for stuff, even righteous stuff like the

healing of a loved one, God doesn't always give us what we want, not right away or sometimes, ever.

And if we are honest, the false-god of our smart phone is what really delivers in our lives. We can shop the inventory of the local Walmart, make a purchase, and have it set aside for our pick up, or have it shipped to our door next day. Now that is delivering.

But fortunately for us, the God we worship, who gave his own Son to save us from ourselves, has bigger, eternal plans to be concerned about. And God gives us this lifetime for us to build our character. And out of God's love if we could just understand the mind of God, all things, even things we consider disasters, are God's opportunities to build our character.

Chelsie came up with the motto, "God's Got This" during her struggle and all those around her adopted it too. And throughout her struggle God built character into all the people in her life's story to the point that at Chelsie's mortal end, when people without faith might say that God didn't have this, Chelsie and her family knew – knew that God did indeed have this – in ways even they couldn't imagine.

And though the video goes on for a few more minutes appealing for money for their foundation, I intentionally had it stopped at that particular moment because the conclusion Chelsie's mother Jana came to was, that in the midst of unthinkable tragedy, and I quote, "There is joy, there really is joy, through all of this."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

I can't imagine losing a child. And at the risk of speaking to a situation I have never had to experience when some of you may have, my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for all of us this week is to remember that the greatest love we will ever know is the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ who would enter into human existence with all our brokenness (i.e., war and hunger and jealousy and hatred and disease and death) to remind us of God's perfect never-failing love. This is the "Hope for God's Joy" that I hoped would come to me.

And while we may not always get our selfish prayers answered the way we want and in our time, God loves us more than we can imagine and always, *always* has what is best for us in mind, and *always* delivers, even when we cannot appreciate it.

And so, on this weekend as we turn our attention to "Hope for God's Joy," in faith, let's trust that we have it. And let us pray that we find what Jana Watts found in the video as she said, "There is joy, there really is joy, through all of this."

Prayer

Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the preaching of John, that, rejoicing in your salvation, we may bring forth the fruits of repentance; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen