

Luke 3: 7-18  
December 13, 2009  
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This week in our advent calendar we celebrate Joy and indeed we are a blessed people. We look around us and for the most part we can find joy or at least remember times of joy. As we approach the story of the birth of Christ many of us remember the part in Luke where he says the angel came and said, "behold I bring you good tidings of great joy..." a message to us that we should have great joy in our lives.

But our gospel reading on this day talks very little about joy. We are still travelling the road with John the Baptist, that wild, abrasive character. We are still listening to his warnings and today's reading really hits a nerve. "You pack of snakes! Thinking just a warning will save you from the wrath to come. Don't think knowing about Sarah and Abraham will save you, no, that's not enough. Knowing is not enough, do something, *produce* good fruit." Today's message of John the Baptist is telling us that it is in the producing, the doing, that we will, for lack of better words, be saved. This is what God wants from us; this is what the Messiah's message will be; it's in the doing, the producing of good fruit.

John certainly has a way of getting his point across. He makes a comparison between his method of baptism and the Messiah's. The Messiah John warns, is coming to separate the wheat and the chaff. The good from the bad, the product from the waste. I'm not so sure I would go listen to this guy. What gloom and doom he brings and this is supposed to be the good news. No doubt the people had questions about how to produce this good fruit.

The question of the people of ancient times and the question we still ask today, is how? The people listening to John ask, "What should we do?" Isn't it funny that the same question has been asked for 2,000 years; what should we do? John gives them a shopping list of what can be done. The same things that we would list today were on the list of things to do in ancient times. Give to those in need; don't cheat people out of their money; don't bully people; don't accuse people falsely; be content with what you have.

Doesn't this all seem so familiar? Doesn't it make perfect sense? And as Christians today we should get this by now don't you think?

For 2,000 years we have continued to ask the same question and the answer remains the same and yet nothing seems to change. Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr said, "The more things change, the more they remain the same." This quote has been used and analysed millions of times. In fact on trying to do some research into it I put the phrase into Google and got 27,800,000 responses. I did not read them all. Suffice to say this quote has got people thinking and applying it in millions of ways. Yes, the more things change the more they remain the same.

Our world has evolved and yet we have the same problems over and over again. We are asked by John to do something to help those who need our help and we respond by doing and yet things appear to stay the same. But are they, really the same? The agencies we have created to put into action our doing are out there and busier than ever this year. The Salvation Army, St. Vincent DePaul, missions and food banks all part of our doing; the need seems so great that the results are hard to see. But believe me within those places lives are changing for the better, at least better than they would be without these organizations. People are fed and clothed through the doing of others.

It would be easy for us to take the message of John the Baptist given to us this morning and see that nothing has changed but I wonder if this year we shouldn't apply the joy of this advent week; the joy that we can look for in the things that we do. Perhaps looking at the actions of people with joy will move us into a better frame of mind this year. The people working in the shelters and food banks and missions all across the country do so because they want to help; because they have answered the call of John the Baptist (to produce good fruit) with joy. They do not sit back and say the people using the service don't deserve it. Instead they serve joyfully, asking what else they can do to help. They write letters to their MP's and MPP's. They donate time, talent and treasure to ensure the cause is not lost. They produce good fruit.

It is easy to sit back and criticize those who utilize these services as lazy, or bumming off the system; it is far more difficult to live with the uncertainty of where your next meal comes from or how you will pay the bills. To decide between toys for the kids Christmas morning and hydro in your poorly insulated, bug infested apartment.

I can remember when I worked in an agency in Windsor that offered a Christmas program; we would visit the homes of those requesting help at Christmas. I went to one place that was full of roaches, everywhere I looked roaches. I was afraid to sit down and I was appalled that people actually lived there; children lived there. The roaches had been there long before the current tenant and would remain there for the next one. It was not the house-keeping of the current tenant; it was a landlord who did not care.

Oh, but there I go again; it's hard to stick with the joy when surrounded by such despair and heartache. It is hard to find the joy of Christmas if we allow ourselves to recognise the reality of many in our world. But the joy is there, when on Christmas morning because of the doing of the people through the agency there were gifts, there was food, for one day there was joy.

Perhaps the only place we find the real joy of Christmas is in the things that we do for others. The good fruit we produce.

I want to leave you with the words of another John: John Lennon his song Happy Christmas: War is Over

And so this is Christmas  
And what have you done

Another year over and a new one just begun

It is up to us once again. We are the ones with the answers. We are the ones who will bring the joy to this advent and Christmas season. We will tell others of the joy told by the angels, "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy!"

What have you done to bring joy to this Christmas? What can you do to continue to bring joy into the new year? These are the questions that never go away. We can only do our part, we need everyone working together to make it a reality.