

## ***Preparing the Way for Advent***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

December 12, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Thank you, Maureen. Let me begin by saying that that was a very gentle paraphrase of the actual Gospel story. In the original version according to Luke, John opens his sermon by the exclamation: You brood of vipers!

Ok, so John's preaching style doesn't intuitively make sense, when one is trying to share good news, preparing the path for joy.

I wonder: What is "joy" anyway?

One organization<sup>1</sup> defines joy in contrast to "happiness". I tend to have faith in people who have had to overcome addiction understanding true and deep joy.

So, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, defines happiness as "a state of well-being<sup>2</sup>"; it is fleeting. It is what happens to you. In contrast: Joy is the emotion evoked by well-being...or good fortune. There seems something deeper about joy. It doesn't depend on what is going on around you. Joy comes from within you.

Researcher Brené Brown tells us that, at the heart of joy must be vulnerability. So, joy might be deeper than happiness, grounded in vulnerability – vulnerability as, being known, being real, being courageous enough learn who you and I really are, and living that out.

Well, there he is, as authentic and wild as can be. John in the wilderness, strange and eco-friendly clothes. A mob of followers wanting to be baptized by him, wanting some good news in very oppressive times. John is not going to coddle the people. Luke's Gospel tells us a bit about the crowd. Ordinary people. Among them were those despised by the average person.

"Even tax collectors came to be baptized." Luke says. No one probably wanted to stand near that one.

"Teacher," the tax collector asks, "what should we do?"

John's response, "Don't collect any more than you are required to."

A soldier was in the crowd, "And what should we do?"

John gives a brutally honest reply – remember, John would not do well writing Christmas cards.

"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay." John retorts in reply to the soldier.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pinnaclerecoveryut.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/happiness>

Joy doesn't happen to us. We prepare a path for joy, by being in right relations, being righteous, with ourselves and our neighbours. Preacher and architect of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, said it well:

Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can...

We do the work in our lives of being just, being kind, not just at Christmas, but every day of our journey. Joy comes not as a destination, but perhaps it surprises us. Think about how you feel when you receive a Christmas gift. It feels great, you are thankful. But then, think about the time you put time and heart into finding, or creating, the perfect gift for someone, or instead of sending an email greeting, you send a card.

What is that you feel, welling up deep inside? Joy! We do the work, wearing our hearts on our sleeves, that takes courage, and we feel Joy.

Surprise! Joy comes out of nowhere. Like that wild, rough-around-the-edges guy, John. No predicting what that preacher is going to say! Receiving adulation from the crowd, what is his sermon about? There is one who will change the world. Look out! John proclaims. Change is coming.

Ralph Milton, a cherished storyteller of The United Church of Canada, recounts an August vacation to the Holy Land. His tour group was descending from Mount Sinai. Hot, dry, dreams of air-conditioned hotel rooms in their heads.

What they didn't know then, was how long the day would be. They boarded their beat-up school bus, as it tried to start. Bang, bump, rattle, crunch. Rattle rattle rattle, they went. They wound their way along the desolate desert road, hot air blowing through the windows. Ralph recalls feeling "thirty miles northwest of No Where, sixty miles southeast of No Place." There, in the middle of nowhere, the bus dies, right there in the desert.

The driver grunts and opens the door. The tourists disembark. They stand, distraught in the narrow shade of the bus. Time passes, most have drained their thermoses. His throat parched, he avoids looking to the glaring midday sun. The Egyptian tour guide flashes them a toothy smile; he knows something that the soft, anxious, tourists don't. Out of nowhere, a taxi appears, and the tour guide flags the taxi down. The cabbie stops and idles, and the two exchange words in another language. The taxi starts off, disappearing over a horizon of rubble and dust.

An hour, maybe two passes as Ralph begins to compose his final testimony.

Then, unbelievably, it happens. Could it be true? Ralph rubs his eyes.

"What to my wondering eyes should appear on the horizon," he muses, "but an ice-cream truck! Thirty miles northwest of No Where, sixty miles southeast of No Place – an ice cream truck!" Two men get out of the truck... one of the men walks around to the back of the truck, reaches in for the stash. He comes over and puts in each sweaty hand a gift – no, not ice cream – but ice-cold water! The second stranger approaches the bus driver, tinkers with the engine, and soon enough, the bus is running again, and it's off to Jerusalem, land of air-conditioned hotel rooms. Truly the Promised Land.

Let us all prepare the way for Joy in our hearts this week. With hearts worn on our sleeves, caring about neighbours, and ourselves – preparing the way for Joy to surprise us. Amen.