

“Joy”

Sermon for Third Advent
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In advent, we hear readings predicting the coming of the Messiah. But not only of the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem. Some of the readings go much further forward in time, like today's. We are on the banks of the Jordan River with John the Baptist.



Word has gone out that he is acting and sounding just like an old-time prophet. So, Jews from the cities come streaming out into the wilderness to hear his prophetic words.

John speaks of a stark choice between good and bad ways of living. But instead of warning the nation of Israel to change its ways, John only speaks about individuals. That's a huge change. If you want to find the roots of western individualism, some of them are right here.

John speaks of good trees and bad trees – the good ones will be gathered by the Messiah, but the bad ones will be thrown away and burned. For the people standing by the river, the obvious question is – am I one of the good ones or a bad one? Will I be saved, or am I doomed? The choice seems pretty stark the way John puts it. And there are people in this crowd everyone thinks is a bad person: the tax collectors, and the Roman soldier. Everyone hates them. But note what John says to them: change your ways. Stop ripping people off, stop beating up the innocent. If you change your behaviour, you still have a chance to be counted as one of the good trees.

But when John speaks explicitly of the Messiah who is coming, he changes his metaphor. He says that when the Messiah arrives, he will separate the wheat from the chaff. The Messiah will

gather the wheat and burn the chaff. To our modern ears that sounds like more of the same – the good people will be gathered to God, while the bad people will be sent into the flames. But the people back then would have heard this differently because they knew more about harvesting wheat than we do.

Most of us see wheat out the car window when we're driving in the country. Wheat is the tall yellow plant used to make bread. How it gets harvested is the farmer's problem, not ours. We just want to buy flour and bread in the store. But to understand what the scripture is saying, we need to understand a little more about wheat.

When wheat is harvested, what farmers want to keep is the wheat berry, which is basically the seed. But to get at it, they have to take away the protective husk, which is called the chaff. On modern farms, the combine harvester machine does this out in the field. But in the old days, people would put the grains into a basket, then toss the grains into the air. The husks, the chaff, would fly off, and land on the floor. That would leave the wheat berries in the basket, which could be ground into flour. So, farmers needed to separate the wheat berry from the chaff. The chaff is bad for digestion, so it would be thrown away or burned.¹

Now, John tells us that when the Messiah comes, he will be like that farmer, separating the wheat berry from the chaff. But here's the thing. If this metaphor is about people, then it isn't about separating good people from bad people. If people are wheat, then there aren't some people who are all chaff, and other people who are all berry. Wheat doesn't work that way. Now, you might say that the chaff is our physical body, and our souls are the berry. But the way John is talking, it sounds like the chaff is stuff that is garbage, something no one wants. Jesus doesn't feel that way about our bodies, after all, He is born in one, and is resurrected in one. Jesus doesn't have a problem with bodies. So, it seems more likely that the chaff is something about our inner selves, our spiritual and emotional being. Something that we have with us, but we should leave behind when we get close to God.

One way of thinking about this is to do a thought experiment.

¹ <https://wholegrainscouncil.org/blog/2014/09/separating-wheat-chaff>



Imagine that you have died, and you find yourself in heaven. What aspects of your inner life would you like to be free of if you were living in paradise?

What is your emotional chaff, the part you wish could be blown away in the breeze? For some people, the answer is easy. I would like my depression to go away. I don't want to spend eternity feeling depressed. For others, it might be anxiety. They don't want to be worrying about phantom problems for the rest of time. Fair enough. Ask yourself, what kind of emotional traps do you fall into that you would like to be without? We all have them, those hamsters running in a wheel, over and over again.

Many of these emotional states are like chaff. They are a protective layer which are meant to defend us from dangers in the world. Depression keeps us out of trouble by keeping us home in bed. A little depression can be helpful, but clinical depression takes it too far, like a switch that gets stuck. Anxiety can also be helpful in moderate doses. It causes us to think two, three and four steps ahead, anticipating possible problems. That can be very useful. Psychologists have argued that having an anxious person on your team can be helpful for anticipating problems that optimists won't see. Anger, anxiety, depression – they all have their uses for protecting us from harm. They are like our husks, the chaff. But in heaven, where it is always safe, they would no longer be needed. So, they could be released, like chaff into the wind.

Now let's take the experiment a bit further: what is the kernel of our being that the Messiah, the harvester, wants to keep? Our souls, right? But what does that feel like? What would it feel like to be gathered close to God, close to the one who planted us in this life?

The evidence for this comes from all over the world. People have had experiences of drawing close to the divine as long as humans have existed. In our time, people who have had near death experiences describe a sense of overwhelming positive feeling. Some speak of seeing a light and feeling enveloped in a deep sense of love that is all encompassing. Everything is wonderful and everything will be all right.

Mystics from the world over also talk about a sense of ecstasy when they feel close to God. People from all sorts of different faiths have spoken in similar terms about feeling suddenly at one with the universe. The sense of being separate from everything else falls away, replaced by a sense of awe-inspiring union. This experience is so intense that mystics find it hard to put into words. When the apostle Paul wrote about his transcendent vision of being transported to the third level of heaven, he refused to give any details. When John wrote the Book of Revelation, he did try to put his vision into words, and the result was a text that sounds like an acid trip.

What all of these people agree on is when you have a direct encounter with God, the feeling it inspires is joy. But what is joy? It's the best, most positive emotion we can experience. Think for a moment about times in your life when you have had feelings of joy. It arrives in many different ways.



Nurses see it on the faces of mothers when their newborn is placed in their arms for the first time. All the pushing and screaming and pain is over, and now they can touch this beautiful new human being.

When we feel joy, we often don't know whether to laugh or cry. It's an emotion that takes us to utter edge of human emotional endurance. We see joy on the faces of athletes, often when they realize they have won a race that has pushed them to the edge. Or the soccer player who wins the final on a penalty kick, and can't believe he's the reason his team, and his country, has won the top prize.

Children are better at joy than adults are. They don't need to be at the edge of their endurance to experience joy.



They can find joy simply by jumping up and down in a puddle. For a few minutes they are no longer separate from the puddle, they are in the puddle, the puddle is all over their clothes, they delight in that union with the splashy wetness of the puddle.

Joy happens when we let our defenses down and we can join thoroughly, absolutely with something else, and get lost in it. You see this when people make music, especially amateurs. They get together to sing a song, either at a wedding or a karaoke bar, and when the song is over, everyone laughs. They laugh because they have been transported out of themselves in a way they didn't expect, but it happened anyway. Joy is only possible when we cast off our protective shell for a bit, when the wheat loses its chaff. Mothers in labour no longer feel in control and all their defenses are down. Children don't have solid who defenses yet, so they can feel joyful union in the simplest things.

In this life, the husk always snaps back into place, our ego always gets its protective layer back. But in today's reading we are promised that when we reunite with God, we will be able to lay aside those defenses for good. We will leave them behind on the threshing room floor, while we are carried away by the Messiah, the one who planted us in this world.

This image of the wheat and the chaff suggests that our true identity resides in joy. That's who we really are, and who we will be again when the end comes. That when we return to God, at the end of this life, or the end of time, we can expect to be joyful because we won't feel separate and alone anymore.

That suggests that beyond this dimension of life, the dog eat dog, rat race life, there is a dimension of joy. And that our souls know it. Deep down, they know our home country is joy. That may seem like a stretch but consider what happens in this month of December.

Our entire economy depends on us hoping that the gifts we exchange on Christmas morning be so right for a person that we will see a spark of joy in their eyes. That they will look at us and know that we really understand them, we know what they truly wanted. That the barriers between us and them will have fallen, simply through the understanding that present represents. We want to inspire joy in each other, no matter how short lived. And we know that Christmas morning often doesn't turn out that way. There may not be joy from the presents we buy. But the retail sector depends on Christmas sales to stay afloat. It may seem strange to say, but We have a joy-based economy. And that suggests that our souls have more control over our lives than we like to admit.

Our soul's sense that our true home is a place of joy, and that shows up in another aspect of Christmas. On the night that Jesus was born, an angel appeared to the shepherds in the fields. The angel said to them, "Fear not, for lo, I bring you good news of great joy, that shall be to all the people --because there was born to you to-day a Saviour -- who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2 10-11) The angel speaks news of great joy because the joy that was in heaven has now come to Earth as a newborn child. And right after these words, the sky opens up, and the shepherds see thousands* of angels, all giving God praise and wishing peace to humankind. The separation between God and humanity, heaven and earth has been removed. The chaff has been blown away, leaving the true kernel, the joyful union of God and humanity. The shepherds get a glimpse of heaven in the sky, and it is full of joy.

When we imagine this scene in our heads, we hear the angels singing. It doesn't actually say that in the Bible. They provide praise, but there's no mention of song. But we remember it as singing because it is a vision of harmony, of everything fitting together, so we celebrate it in song. And we spend this entire month humming and singing, looking forward to moments of joy. Joy that the Messiah brings by offering us a way to let down our defenses, to blow the chaff away for even a few minutes at a time. Deep down, we know, as we hum, that joy is our home country. The one we always belong to, and that one day we will return to. The harvest time will come, and we can set aside our defenses, and truly be united with each other and with the Messiah God sent. The holy one who came to remind us that joy is our right, our inheritance, and our destiny.

Amen.