Sermon on Advent 3 Year C 2021
(Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7)

We’ve all seen the bumper sticker, prominent on pickup trucks: “geturdun.” John could have been the perfect spokesperson if he would have wanted to moonlight for some extra cash, something he wasn’t in the least bit interested in.

In terms of religious ideas, John appears to have been a forerunner, not only of Christ, but of Pelagianism. What’s that you ask? Some of you might know but it’s a belief that “we can do the right thing.” It’s a belief that if you’re exploiting your workers you can stop, you can choose, at this very moment, to be less-exploitative.

In other words, people can make the good choice because, essentially, they are good. Yes, we sin, and we can corrupt ourselves if we keep choosing to sin, but then, when confronted with the truth, we can change and freely choose to do what is right.

Pelagius was a monk in 4th century Rome who taught this and who was opposed by St. Augustine who taught that humans are fallen, that the disease of sin was so pervasive in each of us that we needed God’s prior grace moving us towards health before we could “choose” to do what is right.

Last week I said that it was John’s love for Israel, for his people, and his commitment to God that called people, out of their comfort zone, out in the wilderness to deal with the question “What really matters in your life now” and that people felt, in that encounter, that they could deal honestly.

I’m not taking one thing away from what I said last week if we say *this* week that his message sounds to us/me, at this remove of time and outside of direct contact with him, just like my High School teacher’s used to be: carrot and stick: it’s not that hard to do the right thing, just do it, but if you don’t, big trouble.

Even John’s promise of the one who is “coming” carries this double message: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (good) and with fire (not so good?).”

Yes, he’ll gather the wheat into the barn but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Did he really have to add the word “unquenchable?”

We’ll talk about the great gift of this way of speaking, the great legacy the Hebrew prophets gave the world, in a few minutes, but first

in contrast or juxtaposed to John’s message, we get on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, messages of joy.

Traditionally, Advent 3 is called Gaudete, the Latin, in English “Rejoice” Sunday! Thus the rose or pink candle!

We get a wonderful promise from the Hebrew prophet Zephaniah that disaster and oppression is being removed from Israel, therefore exult with all your heart.

Rejoice because God is singing and rejoicing over you! What an image!

And then, from St. Paul, the famous text near the end of his letter to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

If I was to try to summarize these two seemingly contradictory messages, the one from John and ones that give this Sunday it’s name, maybe cheekily, I might say:

Be good (or else!) and put on a happy face while you’re doing it!

If it were so easy! We know after decades of psychological research that we can be deeply affected by actions we’ve committed, or have been committed towards us, from our past, in families, in intimate partner relationships and by sublimated motives that we’ve buried through shame or self-loathing.

In other words, and more in agreement with St. Augustine, I guess, we don’t always seem to have the control we think we do over what we do and we don’t actually know ourselves half-as-well as we think we know our dog. And if that’s obscure and causes confusion, it was meant to 😊

It’s not so simple to do what is right or to live a joyful life, or both together or more of us would do it!

But, in that complexity, it turns out that the Church has not left us lost for there have been people who have married these insights into human nature with these exhortations, crafting a path of faith that can help us experience the core of what both St. John the Baptist *and* St. Paul are talking about in our readings.

One person who has helped us immensely in this regard is Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA and the person to write out the 12 steps.

These 12 steps were, as is widely known, deeply influenced by the Christian faith and they are not, many have argued, only steps towards sobriety, but steps that essentially map out the path of conversion and discipleship more broadly.

I bring them up because they are a marvellous adaption of the ancient insight that we can make radical change in our life, while at the same time recognizing that we are also a mystery to ourselves and that it often takes the right set of circumstances, the right moment, “hitting bottom” AA participants say, before a person is ready for the kinds of changes that will lead to sobriety and a flourishing life in the wider community.

In the first few steps we admit to God that our sin gets the better of us even though, at one level, we say we don’t want it too and so we turn our lives over to God, as we presently understand God.

This is the Augustinian move. We then make a series of “John the Baptist” or “pelagian” steps: we turn over control to a power greater than ourselves, we make fearless moral inventory, we admit our wrongs to God in the presence of another person.

AA members talk about doing their 5th step as a crucial turning point, the admitting of our wrongs to God in the presence of a trusted listener and supporter.

And it has been a great privilege to be with others as they have done this. I’ve heard some amazing things in these sessions including a confession of murder. But I’m thinking about a particular young man this morning who took several tries to complete this step.

He became a friend even as I became his pastor; He went on to marry and he’s in England involved as part owner of a piano-making enterprise.

If it’s been a while, I strongly encourage you to read the 12 steps for enlightenment and application; God’s help and personal action become intertwined as the steps unfold until in step 12 the circle begins again, now the person who was originally needed help, helps others in the same quandary she was in.

Which by the way is one off the best descriptions of evangelism you’ll ever find.

Being available for people in need of God’s help, not seeking to argue with or “twist the arm” of those who have not expressed that need. John and Jesus responded to requests for help; John helped those who came out to him; Jesus helped those who asked him to.

Both sought to discover if people genuinely wanted help, had “hit bottom” or were simply out playing gottcha religious games.

Repentance has nothing to do with claiming a religious pedigree, John says, “I have Abraham” as a father of faith.” “I’ve gone to St. \_\_\_\_\_\_ for this many years” or “I was baptized into \_\_\_\_”

The path to rejoicing, to deep fulfilling joy, is to embrace a path of daily conversion. This daily conversion is possible and it’s “rubber meets the road” stuff as the examples John gives when asked by the soldier, by the tax man.

And this really is the great gift of the Jewish tradition right here. It is the tradition that birthed both Christianity and Islam and it did so in the context of the idea of liberty, freedom from slavery.

But never a liberty for it’s own sake, always a liberty/freedom *with* responsibility, a social contract, commandments to do what is non-exploitative, non-oppressive.

What a message for our present times when we’re tempted to believe that we can have freedom without social responsibility; that, for instance, our choices around being vaccinated are just “personal” choices.

All our choices have social implications and everyone who touts “freedom” needs to revisit the roots of their understanding of God and faith if indeed they have such.

Pelagius and Augustine were both right! John the Baptist was right as was Bill Wilson! What we need is a path to Joy not simply a feeling to Joy. What we need is a community that will enable us to move together from acts of repentance to daily conversion.

If you want to actually live well, clean and sober, in joy, surrender to a higher power and do everything you can to find and live with and serve such a community.