

Luke 3:7-18      Good News  
December 12, 2021

The carrot and the stick. The fear of punishment and the anticipation of reward. The fear of hell and the hope of heaven. From the time before time people who can have been motivating their subjects children, spouses, household staff, employees, etc.) in both of these ways: positively and negatively. Apparently neither works perfectly in either prediction or controlling behavior.

It is hard for me given my general experience, to avoid the conclusion that people in power believe that stern warnings about future catastrophes *works* better than promises of future benefits. Both methods have one serious drawback; they both assume that people will not behave well, perform at high levels, be good, just because it is the right thing to do, if left to their own resources. They must be motivated. This has been the general human experience.

And yet we know that people so motivated are never genuine, that is, their hearts are only in it to avoid the negative or win the positive, not because in their inmost selves they *believe* in their pattern of life, whatever it is. Love? Divine, unconditional, what theologians have called “dis-interested” love? It is a difficult, if not impossible achievement outside Grace.

We come to this 3rd Sunday of Advent, the one often devoted to the idea of joy (and we have been holding to that scheme of hope and peace, joy and love this

season), and are confronted with the idea that true joy is only possible for those who are able to move beyond the reward and punishment of things towards, for lack of a better term, authentic living. Perhaps, “faithful living,” is a better term. It is better when the anxiety over acceptance and rejection based on behavior is removed and without the anxiety, one is free for joy. Yet the warnings are part of the biblical record.

Take John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, for example. I wondered while the text was being read from Luke a moment ago if anyone felt a kind of dissonance, a buyer's remorse; today is joy Sunday and we read;

“You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath . . . the axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

His listeners wonder if John might be the Christ after he had told them to be good: The person with two tunics should share with the person who has none, the one who had food should do likewise; tax collectors should not overcharge; he told the soldiers not to extort money, and in the most un-American of exhortations, be content with your pay. Then he spoke of the Christ, who was to follow,

“ . . . his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

We may heed these warnings, but they are not associated with joy: a light unburdened feelings of freedom, but rather as serious exhortations. And then the summary comes; “with many other words he exhorted and preached the good news to them,” the happy news of unquenchable fire coming to devour whatever is in its path. It is hard not to see the world in terms of the coming judgement. What good is judgement if no one survives?

Of course, John is not presented as the Christ but as the one who levels the path, prepares the way, so to speak, plows the field for seeds to be planted. Yet it is still a wonder that it is these stick words used to soften people up, when the reality is that if someone seriously needs stern warnings of the coming wrath in order to follow Jesus, then the health of their spiritual life is in question.

Rejoice in the Lord, always,” Paul repeats in Philippians in his famous refrain, “have no anxiety about anything; present your requests to God; be thankful’ the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds.”

Christmas is replete with joy, the joy of the Magi bearing gifts; the joy of the shepherds regaling townspeople about heavenly hosts; the joy of the angels singing glory to God and on earth Peace; the joy of the birth itself. Why does John, of all people, come preparing the way mostly by offering harsh warnings about axes laid to the roots of tress and unquenchable fires consuming chaff?

And in their crazy wisdom, why did those who put together the lectionary readings put this text from Luke 3 in as the gospel reading on this 3rd Advent Sunday when the lord for the day is “joy?” I know, I have asked unanswerable questions.

Let me offer only this: that the joy of Christmas is derived from the purely unconditional love of God, not dependent in any way on human outcomes. There are not requirements, no pre-requisites. It was all decided before hand and it means that our acceptance is also not based on being acceptable. It is a gift, a grace, a present, if we but only open it.

It is as if the warning goes something like this: good news, there are many presents under the tree and you better get in here to open them or else you will be consumed by a raging fire! Anyone with a brain is already in the room with the presents waiting to be given permission to begin.

The joy is that, having been accepted in that way, we are set free from the warnings and even the hopeful promises to *be*, to simply *be*, to seek after the good because of its goodness; the just because of its justice; the beautiful because of its beauty, and so on. What could be more joyful than that?

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