

“Commissioned as Candles of Joy”

Who remembers last week’s gospel lesson? Anyone?

That’s right.

There was a strange guy named John who lived in the wilderness and wore camel hair and ate locusts and he was yelling at people, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”*

He was baptizing people, but when the religious leaders came, he screamed,

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit worthy of repentance....

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;

every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!”

It did not go over well.

And now we find that John has been put in prison.

He had talked about the One who was coming who would be greater than he, his cousin, Jesus.

But Jesus was not exactly doing what John had expected him to do.

So now in his prison cell, John has doubts.

Maybe they’re huge doubts that he’s got everything wrong or maybe they’re small doubts and he just wants a little extra bit of confirmation of what he believes.

Either way, he sends his disciples to ask Jesus,

“Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Now if you were Jesus, how would YOU answer that question?

Seriously.... How would you answer?

Well, if someone asks me if something is A or B, I’m probably going to answer either A or B.

Or if it really isn’t A or B, I might say it’s C.

But one thing is for sure: I will probably answer the question that is asked.

Not so Jesus.

The way Jesus answers is this,

“Go and tell John what you hear and see:

the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,

the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them!”

Does that strike anyone as strange?

Why?

Well, it’s strange because Jesus does not give them his answer to take back to John.

Instead, he says to them, *“Go and tell what you hear and see.... ”*

YOU go and give your own answer to John.

YOU go and tell John what it is that you hear and see.

YOU go and tell John how people are hearing the amazing story of God’s love for them.

YOU go and tell John how lives are being visibly transformed!

YOU go and tell John about the signs and wonders and miracles you’ve seen!

What I finally understand after decades of reading this story,

is that Jesus is not giving them an answer to John’s question that they can take back to him.

Jesus is telling THEM to answer John’s question!

Jesus is telling them to witness, to testify, to share their God-sightings.

And when you think about it, no message that Jesus could have given them to take back to John would have given John that which he was really seeking.

Because, you see, John already knew who Jesus was.

John had already prophesied about Jesus.

John had been so sure about Jesus that he had stood up for him,

risked his safety & security & his health & happiness by witnessing to who Jesus was,
and gone to prison because of him.

And with all of that, John still had his doubts.

And Jesus just telling him, “yes, I am”, or “no, I’m not”, would not have been enough to quell those doubts.

The only thing that could strengthen John’s faith at this critical time

was to hear people talk about what they had seen Jesus do,
to hear them talk about what they had seen and heard with excitement and enthusiasm,
to hear the awe in their voices, to see the joy shining in their eyes,
to feel the heat of their passion radiating all around them.

Now I know most of us here are of Northern European ancestry,

some from far enough north that we might be called the “frozen chosen”.

And believe me, I have lived most of my life from that place of reserve and caution.

I also understand that we’re products of our worldly culture,

and that one of the rules in this kingdom of this world is that we are not supposed to talk about our faith.

And for most of my life I adhered to that rule.

But here’s the thing: if someone is in a situation like John’s

in which they are filled with doubt or despair or a sense of failure or fear,
and they ask you if Jesus is the Messiah or not, they won’t be looking for the correct theological answer,
because such an answer will not convince or persuade anyone of anything.

Faith, which is what John was looking for, which anybody asking that question is looking for,
is not found in the words of the correct theological teaching.

That’s because faith can never be taught; it can only be caught.

When my son went to the doctor last week to ask the doctor to give him help and hope,

he didn’t go to the doctor just for the doctor to give him the correct words out of a textbook.

He went to the doctor in order for his life to be saved.

And no matter what that doctor told him, if it was just words,

no matter how true they were, they wouldn’t have healed him,

Simply telling him about the antibiotic or procedure needed was not be enough to cure him.

It was because the doctor gave him more than words;

he gave him something that he had learned by his experience.

He gave him antibiotics and arranged for surgery.

I grew up in the church; my dad was a pastor; I worked at a summer church camp; I went to a church college;
I went to seminary.

In all those settings, I was told what tithing was, but I wasn’t tithing.

I didn’t start tithing because of what I was taught; I started tithing because it’s something I caught.

A man in my congregation at Saint Paul’s here in Bridgeport came and told what he had seen and heard.

He talked about his experience.

There was excitement in his voice, there was elation in his eyes, & there was joy flowing out from his heart.

And I wanted to experience that joy that I saw in him.

It’s not enough to come to church, it’s not enough to go to Bible study,

it’s not enough to pray, it’s not enough to believe, and it’s not enough to feed the hungry,

because none of those things in and of themselves is enough to bring good news to those who need it,

none of those things in and of themselves produce signs or wonders or miracles,

none of those things are enough to convince someone who is full of doubt and despair.

What a person who is doubting or depressed or despairing needs to hear is not some objective truth,

but your own truth, your own testimony, your own witness of faith.

God did not give us the Word in order to supply us with information;

God gave us the Word for the purpose of transformation.

Isaiah prophesied that the eyes of the blind shall be opened
and the ears of the deaf would be unstopped;
and once the blind could see what God was doing
and the deaf could hear what God was saying
then their tongues which had been speechless would sing for joy.
We don't have to wait for that prophecy to be fulfilled! It was fulfilled in Jesus!
And that means that when we hear and see what God is saying and doing,
our frozen chosen hearts will be thawed, our tongues will loosened,
and we will find ourselves telling everyone we meet
about the signs and wonders that we've seen.

Isaiah prophesied that the ransomed of the Lord would return to God
and come into God's house with singing,
that everlasting joy would be upon their heads,
and they would know joy and gladness.
We don't have to wait for that prophecy to be fulfilled either!
Because it, too, was fulfilled in Jesus!
And that means that when we return our hearts to God and sing God's praises
we will know joy!

The Psalmist also prophesied that the God who keeps promises forever would
open the eyes of the blind, set the captives free, lift up those who are bowed down,
and give food to those who hunger and justice to those who are oppressed;
That prophesy, too, has been fulfilled in Jesus.
And once again, that means that when we trust in God's promises,
God will open our eyes and set us free, that we may know joy.

And that joy is not for us to keep, but it is what we are to share.
This week let us commit to being candles of joy in the world.

Will you pray with me?

Faithful God, you sent Jesus to redeem us
and to set us free from all that binds us, and from all that weighs us down.
Open our eyes and unstop our ears
that we may see and hear the wonders of your mighty love.
Fill our hearts with joy and loosen our tongues to praise.
Send us out to go and tell all that we hear and see you doing,
and make us ready to account for the joy that is within us.
In this third week of Advent, God, let us shine with the light of your joy.
We pray this in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. **Amen**