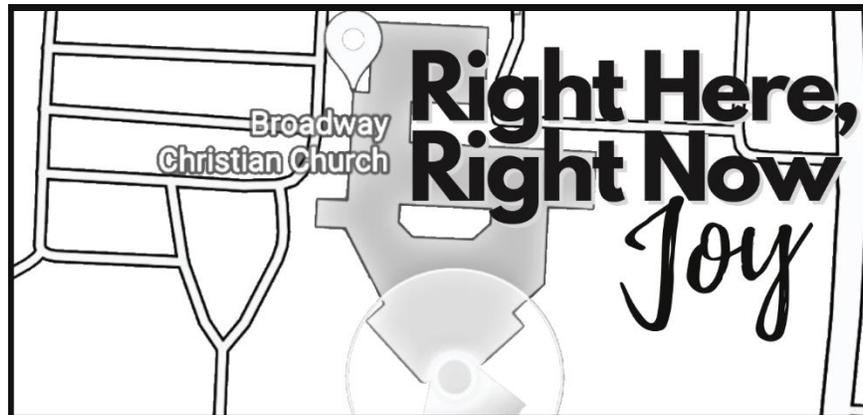




**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • December 12, 2021**  
**The Third Sunday of Advent**



**The Scripture**  
**Luke 3:7-18**

*John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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.” And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the*

*wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

**The Message**  
**“Right Here, Right Now: Joy”**  
**Mark Briley**

What do you want for Christmas this year? The children among us already have an answer. They know what they want. I loved the picture a friend sent me a few years ago. Our friend asked her son to look at this catalog (*remember catalogs?*) and circle the things he wanted for Christmas. What she got back from him and kindly passed along to us in a picture was this two-page catalog space that had one giant circle around the edges of both pages as if to indicate that he wanted everything pictured on both pages. Politely, he did “X” out one item on one of the pages. It was easier to exclude the one thing he didn’t want than circle everything but that one item.

What do *you* want for Christmas? The adults among us are skeptical of the question. Because you’ve been around long enough that you know the answer isn’t supposed to be something tangible. The answer is “*Jesus*,” right? You’ve been around a bit. But if you allow your inner child to come out, you might think of a pair of earrings, a leopard print scarf, or some new techie gadget. Or maybe what you want for Christmas is your toes in some tropical sand or a handmade coupon from your kids that is good to cash in for three hours of alone time. Maybe you’re more philosophical – you just want to be with your family in a non-COVID sort of way. You just want all the kids back in the nest. You want the relationship healed or the ailment gone. What do you want for Christmas this year? You’ve got a list somewhere inside of you.

A harder question may be, “*What did you get for Christmas **last** year?*” Maybe the lists were the same, and maybe they always are. But we move on. What seemed so important at the time or what we wanted so terribly a year ago has faded into the background, and we’re longing again for things that we want for Christmas that we may not get all over again.

It’s why we find ourselves on this hinge Sunday of Advent – week three of four – asking each of us to show up to the right *here*, right *now*, with a spirit of Joy.

Scoff.

Here we go again with the joy stuff. “*This just ain’t the year for it, pastor.*” I get it. It’s been a tough run this season, this year, the past two. We’re just trying to stay afloat and get along with people even on the most surface of levels. I hear my mom’s voice

whenever I'm in such a headspace. She always used to say, "*Don't let anyone steal your joy.*" And there are times when I haven't tucked in that joy like a running back is taught to carry the ball... tucked in tight so that no defender can sweep in and knock it out of your grasp. We owe it to "*Joy,*" don't you think... to put joy back where it belongs; to put it back right here, right now in a prominent place. "*Don't let anyone steal your joy!*" That's where we're headed today on this Joy Sunday.

I was reminded by a pastor friend this week of a great line in the Christmas movie, *Elf*.

Have you pulled this movie back out yet this season? It's always good for the soul. Buddy the Elf, a human raised by elves, learns that he's actually a human (*and not an elf as he long perceived*). He longs to head from the North Pole to find his biological father, Walter, who lives in New York City. Buddy is stoked and ready to roll when Santa breaks to him the bad news. "*Buddy... your father is on the naughty list.*" "Noooooo," Buddy screams. But Santa goes on to say (*as my colleague paraphrased it this week*): "*Buddy, don't worry about it. Sometimes, we lose our way in life. We forget what's most important. But everyone has the right to find their way again and maybe what they need to get back is the Christmas spirit.*"



Maybe that's what we need today, too. Has it passed you by? Our *Right Here, Right Now*, song lyric of focus today as we've pulled out lines from the famed 1991 Jesus Jones song by that name is the song's first line: "*A woman on the radio talks about revolution when it's already passed her by.*" It's already passed. Don't let the joy pass you by because you're bogged down in whatever mess of the day has you tied up. It will take some work, but don't neglect the chance to get to the Joy. It's worth it.

JtB – John the Baptist – is our Advent compadre this week, and we've grown him up fast. Last week, we celebrated his birth and his father, Zachariah's, return to the talking world after months of silence. Fast forward from the diapers to John's daily ministry of baptizing people looking to turn their lives around. This was a wild deal.

We've normalized it because we've accepted it as part of the Christian narrative, but John was an out-there sort of dude doing a new thing. And he's not a warm and fuzzy kind of guy. If you're the wilderness type, maybe you could say, "*I could party with John the Baptist*" ... maybe. But really – he's got an edge to him that could kill a lot of chill, party vibes. For starters, he lambasts those who have come out to hear him speak in the wilderness, where John plants himself day after day. John starts out calling them names, "*You brood of vipers!*" I started my message today asking what you want for Christmas this year. Do you see the difference?

But people are flocking to John. Why? He's telling the truth – and it's different from what they're hearing in the status quo world. He's a bit of a sight to see, I imagine. He dresses funny and eats weird stuff. But he's a throwback to what the people knew of Elijah and what their faith tradition taught them. Before the Messiah would arrive, Elijah was to return and pave the way for the Savior. John was living faith on the edge enough that people were questioning, "*Is John the Messiah?*" or at least, "*Is John Elijah returned?*" People are talking and tweeting and making TikTok videos about John, and so the crowds are headed out there – if even at first just curious – like driving through the lightshow at Veteran's United campus out south of town – how fun is that!?! But when they get there, they listen to John. Because in the end, if you're going to go to the effort to get out there, to come to church, to pull up and spend any of your precious time on a podcast, you're seeking a bit of truth, about God, about the world, about yourself.

And you know... life is an ongoing battle. You're either in the middle of a battle, you're coming out of a battle, or you're getting ready to go into a battle. It's a constant. And it's hard to hang on to joy when you're constantly battling. This week – my beautiful wife had a birthday – Joy! Love her and love celebrating her. Next night – Blue Christmas service in this space. We faced the hardness of this season. Less Joy but super meaningful and healing needed to make space for joy. Ebb and Flow.

The catalytic converter on the Church bus? Stolen again this week for the second time in a couple short months. Joy-killer. New toilets installed in the Fellowship Hall bathrooms the next day – Joy-builder! Ebb and flow, right? So how do you find the joy in the ebbing and flowing? That's what the crowds wanted to know, and so they go to John.

Here's the cool thing about John for we Christians. He's *all* ours. Nobody else wants him. No department store is pulling out their JtB clothing line though he might be a good *Hey Dude* sponsor – he'd dig that footwear I bet. Hallmark hasn't put him on any of their cards. What would they say? "*From our house to yours, you brood of vipers – pull your stuff together and start steppin' right. Merry Christmas, you filthy animals.*"

Just doesn't fly. But John's role is less manger, new-baby-smell-joy, and more, here's the truth that will carve the right space in your life so the joy can flood in... even in anticipation. John says, "*Clean it up for heaven has come near.*" "*Repent!*" is actually the churchy word he uses but it just means, "*Take a U-ie,*" "*Hard stop. Turn around.*"

Essentially, it's a word to pay attention. See your life. It's not a guilt trip. It's not a naughty list situation where you must make a list of your sins and sulk about it. People do not simply turn away from a life just because they are told to. *No.* They listened to

John because he was asking them to lean in, and he offered them something deeper, truer to turn *toward*. This field trip to the riverside wasn't a fearful trip... but an exciting one.<sup>1</sup> They didn't want church as usual. They were over the pandemic of societal posturing and playing the same old-religious games. They were willing to hear the truth about themselves and lean in to even the harshness to find true joy. And what does the text say in our last verse today – “*And this was GOOD NEWS!*” So, we don't get to Christmas without passing through John.

Will Willimon, former Duke University chaplain, said it well in college-life lingo for his students in Advent chapel. “*If you are going to graduate, you must first get past the English department. If you are going to practice law, you must pass the bar. If you want to get to medical school, you must survive organic chemistry.*” Likewise, “*If you want to get to the joy of Bethlehem in the presence of Jesus, you must get past John the Baptist in the desert. John's a demanding professor. The final for his course has some tough questions.*” And what are those questions? He says it clearly in the text: “*If you're a fashionista, give half your clothes away. If you're a foodie, invite a beggar to your feast. If you're a shyster, stop cheating people. If you're a bully, become a model of kindness.*” And then he drops this strong word: “*You've got to stop being a taker, if you want to experience Christmas rightly. You've got to become a giver.*”

And maybe that's it. Maybe it's not so much that others are stealing our joy but maybe we've been more consumed with messing with the joy of others – if even subconsciously. Maybe that's why joy is alluding us. Maybe we're spending our days obsessed with cutting others down – their ideas, their hopes, their personhood, their theology, their self-esteem. No wonder we can't find the joy. We're trying too hard to steal it from others.

John invites us to show up at the riverside, hear some truth about *ourselves* (not everyone else...*ourselves*), turn it around so we can leave some stuff behind and turn with open arms to the joy that is in front of us right here; right now. Don't wait to enjoy your kids until the next stage of their lives – find joy in them now. Don't wait for that promotion to enjoy your work. Find joy in being the best at what you're doing now. Someone said this week, “*Promotion is not something over which you have oversight. You'll get promoted when you're owning what you do now so well that others say, "We need what you're bringing in that role into this new opportunity."*”

I know promotion is wrapped in privilege, too, but the focus is legit. Joy isn't a someday kind of achievement. It's finding it now when we're in the thick of our present reality.

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<sup>1</sup> —Diane Darling, “*How to Get to Bethlehem,*” in the *PRISM E-pistle* newsletter of Evangelicals for Social Action, December 18, 2002.

And the gift John offers? It's disarmingly simple and strikingly accessible to everyone. John starts with John's word that the crowds not lean on the old covenantal promise of Abraham. "*Well, we're children of Abraham so we're good.*" John says, "*Forget that! The heirs of God's covenant with Abe include **anyone** who leads a life of generosity, honesty and respect.*"

What's better is that John includes some well-known folks from sketchy professions – tax collectors and soldiers – both seen as those caught up in the manipulative empire in those days. They've come out for the cocoa and truth talks, and John says, "*We got room for you, too.*"

You see, when John is using all this talk of burning the chaff and separating the wheat from the bad stuff, he's not categorizing groups of people, he's digging deeper into your heart and mine. As my friends from the SALT project lay out in a commentary of this word, "*Every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) [as I understand it] use wind to separate these husks — collectively known as "chaff" — from the grain, the goal being, of course, to save **every** grain, not to separate the good grain from bad grain.*"

Could it be a metaphor of cleansing and preservation, not a division of ins and outs? What husks do you need removed so you've got clearance room for joy? -- the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed – the sins that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others. There *is* a line between good and evil but, as Alexandr Solzhenitsyn says, "*It doesn't run between groups; the line between good and evil runs through the heart of each person.*"

What each of us requires is restoration, liberation from whatever "*husks*" are holding us back. We've got to let those things go – letting those traits, those sins, those realities be burned away in God's unquenchable fire.<sup>2</sup> Remove that chaff so that we can be restored for the joy that is intended to be ours.

"*A woman on the radio talks about revolution when it's already passed her by.*" We're talking, talking, talking these days about judgment, and politics, and sides, and opinions; and we're living it right here, right now, to the point of obsession. And it's not all bad, I know. We want, and need, to be informed. But we're tied up into personalities and talking points, and it's all holding us back from letting the chaff burn away and simply saying, "*If I could start over right now... what joy could I build my life on?*" We know what to do. We know what needs some clean-up attention in our lives – our thoughts; our speech; our attitudes; our actions or inactions. We generally *know*. JtB

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<sup>2</sup> As from the lectionary commentary produced by the Salt Project. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-media-resources-blog>

gives us the gift of hearing it; this truth; and what to do about it. *“Let it go and get clear.”*

What if what I want for Christmas this year is to make room for joy in the right now because by the time all my joy-qualifiers come to pass, it will have already passed me by.

Some Advent purists out there tell you to save the joy for Christmas Day. Advent is the preparation season after all. It's the learning to patiently wait and so on. And I get it. And I accept much of it. But did you know that *Joy to the World* wasn't written to be a Christmas carol? Isaac Watts wrote it as an anticipatory celebration based on Psalm 98 of not just the first Advent (*or coming of Jesus*) but also the Second Advent – as Jesus comes again and again – which is to be the focus of every ongoing season of life. It is intended to be a hymn sung even in the seasons of stolen catalytic converters and the installation of new toilets. And maybe that's just it. Joy isn't supposed to be a one-off; a oncer-event that was nice for the big moment and then tucked away for another year. Let's throw the whole thing off, shall we, and sing *Joy to the World* right now... right in the middle of whatever else we're living through knowing that JtB says to the crowds that flocked to him and to those of us who hear his words now asking, *“What do we do now?”* He says, *“Turn it around. Own up to the sin. Shed it. And live in joy because it's not just atop some Christmas wish-list, it can be ours right here, right now. Don't miss it.”*

So even if we sing it poorly and I horrify our music teams or old school purists, will you make a joyful noise with me and belt out *Joy to the World*... right now?

*“Joy to the world the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing,  
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.”*

Thanks be to God!

### **Song of Focus**

#### ***“It's in Giving, We Receive – (Andrew's Song)”***

WORDS AND MUSIC: ED VARNUM

1. Andrew was a jokester, a jester, and a friend,  
and whenever I was down,  
he made me laugh again.

*(Continues on the next page.)*

And by the life he lived, the zest, the vital fire  
Andrew taught me that the greatest joy  
is lifting others higher.

*Refrain:*

Both Andrew and the ones he served  
experienced great joy.

In the giving and receiving,  
God's Spirit was employed.

That's how my friend explained it,  
and I came to believe,  
because his joy revealed it:  
It's in giving we receive.

2. Not with words but by what he did,  
he taught me how to live:  
the fullest life that we can know  
comes through what we give.  
I saw many friends who changed  
as they grew to men from boys,  
but maturing, Andrew was still the same,  
and his life grew in God's joy!

*Refrain:*

Both Andrew and the ones he served  
experienced great joy.

In the giving and receiving,  
God's Spirit was employed.

That's how my friend explained it,  
and I came to believe,  
because his joy revealed it:  
It's in giving we receive.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH