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Advent 2 Meditation

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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Have you ever wondered what the most popular Christmas song is?

One way to determine that is to consult the Muzak *Holiday Channel* and find the song that has the most versions available. If that's a fair way to deal with this question, then the answer would be "*The Christmas Song*," most often sung by either Nat King Cole or Bing Crosby. Second prize goes to "*White Christmas*" (Bing Crosby again). Then come "*Winter Wonderland*" and "*Silver Bells*."

All of these songs contain the requisite amount of "*warm fuzzies*."

Now, imagine you are sitting in front of a crackling fire with Nat King Cole's mellow voice in the background. Suddenly the door bursts open, a gust of wind blows snow into the room, and a man with a bushy beard and camel-skin tunic strides in. There is fire in his eyes.

As he chews on a handful of locusts, he says, "*How nice that you're feeling cozy and happy. Your holly and mistletoe look lovely over the fireplace. But what have you done lately for justice and peace among all people? And what effort have you made recently to respect the dignity of every human being?*"

It's the Baptizer. A real *killjoy*. You want *warm fuzzies* and he gives you caustic questions. You want a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, but he doesn't much care how you feel or what you think. He just wants to know what you've done for the kingdom recently.

And when we ask, '*what we should do?*', he offers some good examples. If some people have too much and other people have too little, *guess who should share?* This is not a new message; in the Book of Exodus, the story of God's gift of manna was all about the same thing. Nobody should have too much, and nobody should have too little. *Everyone should have enough*. That godly prescription is strong medicine. It subverts the notion that our lives should be exclusively focused on striving to accumulate all that we can. It challenges the idea that we should invest our time and talent and treasure only into making ourselves happy and comfortable. Instead, the Baptizer says, we should strive for justice and peace among ***all people*** and put our time, talent, and treasure into *kingdom investments*.

And there's nothing on the Muzak *Holiday Channel* that will be good accompaniment for that message.

When some powerful people (tax collectors and soldiers of the occupation army) question the Baptizer, he challenges them to be fair and nonviolent. In other words, they should respect the dignity of every human being. Listeners who have experienced *harassment* or have been *cheated* are suddenly the ones feeling some *warmth*. This messenger is on their side. They find their expectations rising. Maybe there is *hope* for a better world.

That is the message that sears itself into our consciousness. This intruder is here ***not*** to spoil our holiday, but to point us in the direction of ***real hope and real joy***. His words are the refiner's fire that burns away impurities.¹

¹ John C. Morris, *Refiner's Fire*, The Christian Century, December 6, 2000

Compare these words of the Baptizer with the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians:

"Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul tells his friends in Philippi. "Again I will say, 'Rejoice.'" "Do not worry about anything. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

I don't know about you, but when I read these verses, my inner teenager rises up in rebellion. Snarky and superior, he frowns, rolls his eyes, and heads for the door.

But what's helping me as I contemplate Paul's advice is to remember that he wrote this letter *from prison*—while awaiting trial and anticipating a likely outcome of death. It also helps to remember that he was a man who was threatened, rejected, beaten, and shipwrecked. A man with a *"thorn in the flesh"* that God apparently did not heal. A man whose haunted past included contempt, rage, and even violence. A man who knew firsthand the irony of a *Pax Romana* that left most people cringing under state-sponsored oppression.

Paul, you see, was no *Pollyanna*; he was a tried and tested *realist*.

So I wonder whether these famous verses from Philippians are not so much about *feeling good* as they are about *cultivating the inner life of the soul*. In Paul's view, peace and joy are not emotions we can conjure up within ourselves. They come from God, and the only way we can receive them is through consistent spiritual practice: *prayer, supplication, gentleness, and contemplation*.²

This is important to understand because **mystics** throughout the ages (like the Baptizer and even realists like Paul) have understood how the holy fire burns away the superficial images and idols we erect.

For example, one of the most famous expressions of this reality comes from French philosopher and mathematician *Blaise Pascal*. He wrote, *"In the year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November . . . from about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight: FIRE. . . . God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Emotion. Joy . . . Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy . . . My God . . . let me **not** be separated from thee forever."*

Pascal carried this description of his experience with him for the rest of his life. It was written under a drawing of a *blazing cross*. The Baptizer points in the same direction, to *the One* who will baptize with fire and ask us to take up our crosses. The fire that blazes forth in this story is *not* from a cozy fireplace. It is from the word of God.

As Pascal realized, underneath the holy fire is *holy joy*. Underneath John's stern message is the *good news* that a better world is possible by the grace and power of God. Zephaniah and Isaiah said it thousands of years ago. Paul wrote of it in the first century. Now we can hear it too, if we will only turn off those other songs for a while.³

Joy, you see, is what happens when we daily *live into* the belief that God *can and will bridge the gap between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes*. It is a posture, an orientation, a practice. A willingness to sit gently but persistently in the tension of the "not yet," trusting that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in that in-between place for as long as it takes.⁴

² Debie Thomas, *When Paul Sounds Like Pollyanna*, The Christian Century, October 13, 2017

³ John C. Morris, *Refiner's Fire*, The Christian Century, December 6, 2000

⁴ Debie Thomas, *When Paul Sounds Like Pollyanna*, The Christian Century, October 13, 2017

Let us pray—

Come, Lord Jesus. Come into this world and break it open for Your love. Come into this world and remove the violence from our hearts. Take the weapons from our hands and open our arms to embrace one another. Take the malice from our hearts and replace it with Your unconditional, undying love. Take the fear from our minds and replace it with the assurance that Your presence is always with us. Remove the barriers that we have built up that keep us separated from one another. Restore the bridges we have torn down that have joined us together. Come, Lord Jesus. Remind us that in You, we are one people, one body. Come, Lord Jesus. Remind us that in You all our hope is found. Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.⁵

⁵ Rev. Mindi, *Rev-o-lution*, 2015.