

“Bundle of Joy”

Sermon - December 14, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Here's a sign of getting old: when you're on your monthly Zoom call with your buddies from high school and instead of talking about women and carousing like you did 50 years ago, the main topic of conversation is swapping medical stories and advice.

Still, I'm blessed to be in pretty good health. Not to brag, but though I'm in the Social Security age bracket, I sleep like a baby. Y'know, I wake up every couple of hours, crying, and have to go to the bathroom

There is something about newborn babies. My wife Helen and I were watching some “Everyone Loves Raymond” TV episodes. On one of them, the grandfather, played by Peter Boyle, sneaked in and picked up each of the twin boy infants and inhaled saying, “Ah, the smell of the fountain of youth.”

In ten days, we will hear how Mary “gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger.”

Swaddling cloths, of course, are bands of cloth that you use to swaddle/swathe, that is. wrap a baby, which helps them sleep better because they snug as a bug in rug.

And people, especially the parents, can't help but smile with joy when they see a baby. In fact, 100 years ago people started using the term “bundle of joy” for a swaddled baby.

Of course, we use different expressions when they become teenagers, but that's story for another time.

I'm sure Mary and Joseph saw the infant Jesus as their bundle of joy.

Indeed, as Mary told Elizabeth when she was pregnant, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Thus, we look forward to birth of Jesus as Christ our Lord with joy ushering in a new age, the kingdom of God.

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And yet, we look around and struggle a bit with being joyful when we see so much misery and oppression. And it seems to be getting worse, not better, and often nominally done, shamefully, in the name of Christ.

Our lectionary passages today reflect that kind of feeling as well.

Last week for the second Sunday in Advent, we heard about *John's testimony* of Jesus and him coming to baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire, his winnowing fork in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but burning the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Today the third Sunday in Advent we hear about *Jesus' testimony* to John.

John had publicly condemned Herod, the king, for divorcing his first wife and unlawfully taking his brother's wife Herodias as his second wife. Herodias was furious at John. So, to appease his wife and his own fear of John's great popularity, Herod imprisoned John, later beheading him.

John was sitting in prison probably wondering, "Did I make the right call when I baptized Jesus as the Messiah? I kind of thought the Messiah would clean house."

You can empathize with John. I mean, what kind of messiah leaves the forerunner in prison?

In typical fashion, Jesus does not give John's followers a yes/no response. He does not recount his identity as the Son of God. He does not give a theological treatise about his beliefs.

Instead, Jesus responds by naming his actions and the impacts they have on the community. He paraphrases, in part, from today's Isaiah 35:5-6, which says, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the

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ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

And from Isaiah 61:1, "The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners."

Whereas John's ministry carried a healthy dose of judgment, Jesus' ministry, in contrast, has focused on healings, exorcisms, and public banquets with tax collectors and sinners—in other words, strong on healing and restoration, but weak on judgment and vindication.

Matthew's Gospel persistently links judgment and redemption inextricably together, as two faces of a single reality. The signs that define Jesus' ministry echo passages in Isaiah that mingle announcements of vengeance and judgment with the promise of liberation, as we have heard over the past couple of Sundays.

In these passages, as in the ministry of Jesus, the blind, the deaf, the poor, refer not just to the individuals Jesus heals, but metaphorically to the condition of God's people as a whole, including John and Jesus' own disciples. Jesus wants to save peoples, not just individuals.

But is this a Messiah that John or we can live with? Do we really like a God who insists on coming to forgive, to show mercy, to call even the unrighteous to repentance? To what we hear and see from many Christians today, the answer is no. Just like the ancient Romans, many today, particularly those in power, believe compassion, kindness, meekness, and humility are signs of weakness. That somehow they are God's instrument to clear the threshing floor—as they interpret things.

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So many Christians today want a Christ that will come and burn the “chaff” with unquenchable fire while being completely blind to the possibility that they themselves might be the chaff while at the same time completely missing Jesus’ message.

Our culture reflects that. Our blockbuster movies typically have “good guys” and “bad guys”, heroes conquering villains. Luke Skywalker and his ragtag team fighting and defeating the emperor and thus the empire. Victory, happy ending.

And honestly, I like them. I like simple good and evil; good fights evil and wins. It’s cathartic. But that is not the way. As Isaiah 35:8 from today’s lesson says, “A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.”

We are not to fight fire with fire but to work towards changing hearts by being the example, being the light, so drawing others to God and God’s ways.

Jesus’ response in today’s gospel lesson is a call to action. Any who follow Jesus are called to embody the good news as Jesus did, sharing it through actions with those who are most vulnerable. More than offering “thoughts and prayers”, people of God are called to embody the good news and to help others embody it as well physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Admittedly, it is far easier to preach than to practice. But we are not called to be perfect or even successful by worldly standards. We are called simply to do God’s work.

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As humble followers of Christ, we are not people adrift in the world with uncertainty about who we are, how we should live, or where we are going.

We belong to his community of believers, dedicated to him, instructed by him, and carrying out his ministry. As his disciples, and with mutual support, we align ourselves with his ministry in our witness to the gospel and in our works of mercy and our care for the world.

That is how we bring joy to world—and to ourselves. Because when we see the little miracles in every day life, when we see how even our little acts of love help others, when we can feel the joy that comes from following Jesus' actions.

As poet Maya Angelou said, “We need Joy as we need air. We need Love as we need water. We need each other as we need the earth we share.”

The race that is set before us, though, is a marathon, not a sprint. In fact, it is likely to be our whole lifetime. But as today’s epistle lesson says in James 5:7, “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.”

Patient not by sitting around waiting or letting injustices continue, but patient that our actions will make a difference, never losing hope, always giving love, and doing so with joy. As Mother Teresa said, “Joy is prayer; joy is strength; joy is love; joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.”

So go in the name of Christ and be a bundle of joy.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.