

**Sermon Notes of
Regional Director Tim Sitterley's Sermon on December 12, 2021:**

**"The End of the World As We Know It
(Luke 3:7-18)"**

Third Sunday of Advent – Joy

John 15:11, "I (Jesus) have told you this so that my JOY may be in you and that your JOY may be complete."

[In today's sermon, Regional Director Tim Sitterley, at church in the Y, discloses how John the Baptist shows us that the world, as we know it, is coming to an end because of the coming of Jesus.]

[There was a scripture reading of the verses being covered today before Tim Sitterley began his message by Ed Stonick.]

Luke 3:7 (NIV), John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8) Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9) The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10) "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. 11) John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12) Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" 13) "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. 14) Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15) The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16) John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17) His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18) And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Introduction:

- Tim has been traveling a lot lately and is very happy to be here at Grace Monrovia today.
- He appreciates being here for the ordination that will take place after his message.
- He used to live in the Pasadena area many years ago and has a lot of good memories.

- The poem, “Fire and Ice” by Robert Frost is relevant to these particular verses.

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.*

*But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

- It's not a very uplifting or encouraging poem, is it?
- But, we like to fixate on the end of the world scenarios, whether it's Zombies, or plagues or asteroids.
- There's a movie out in the theaters right now called, “Don't Look Up.”
- It's mostly a satire on global warming and how the social media works.
- Now, the premise of the movie is that an asteroid is about to hit and destroy the world causing our distinction and wiping out all life as we know it.
- But, in the movie, people are more interested in the backstory of the scientists presenting this information and the media distorting it.
- People like to watch those movies about the end of the world, as we know it.

John the Baptist:

- In the scriptures, John is often portrayed as a crazy acting prophet, who warns us to take stock of who we are and where we're heading particularly in times like this.
- John the Baptist is a kind of no-excuse character who addresses his audience, in the passage that was just read, as snakes and vipers and gets away with it.
- He, also, warns them not to whine about privileged positions and doesn't care that Abraham is in their DNA.
- John threatens that he has his eye on a finely sharpened ax that he could deploy and quickly turn them into kindling.

John's overall message:

- John cries out for people to take account of their lives and then asks the question, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”
- Now, to take a trip down to the Jordan River from Jerusalem area is a full day's journey on foot or on donkey.
- It's an intentional trip to go and hear what John the Baptist had to say there.
- These people came here, because of an urgency they saw in their lives.
- And then, John throws this epic imagery at them, which probably had enhanced their fear which brought them out to see and hear John in the first place.
- Now, for some reason, as they looked at it, their world was ending, which would happen in not too many years in the future.
- And so, they believe John will tell them what to do – which is to bear fruit.

- Then, in essence, the crowd asks John in verse 10, “How shall we live or what shall we do?”
- John gives us a life that flows from the baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins which is the good news life.
- Even though their world would be ending, there’s a life style of radical generosity and integrity.
- When one sees homeless camps here in the richest county on the planet, it’s possible we fall short on both generosity and integrity.
- John tells us to share what we have, so that anyone who has a need, that need is being met.
- And he also tells us to do business honestly without working the system so that others are manipulated and forced to give us more than we deserve.
- John calls us to such an ordinary goodness as to sharing a coat or sharing a meal.

Christ’s first arrival:

- Now, the world didn’t end with Christ’s first arrival, His first advent.
- Instead the world is being transformed.
- If anything, we need to see that the world as we know it is ending.
- The world, where justice seems so often neglected and people who know how to work the system for their own gain, is coming to end – maybe not as fast as we would like to see it, but it is coming to an end.
- The world that makes billionaires and people starving to death exist side by side is coming to an end.
- The world where violence against women and children is coming to an end.
- And like the ax ready at the root of the tree, Jesus comes in the incarnation, filled with the Holy Spirit and living a life of purity and comes to transform our world.
- As we celebrate Advent, we know that Jesus will come again, at the final judgment, where the Spirit will once again, using a purifying and refining fire, bring an end to everything in this world that does not belong to the Good News Kingdom.
- This awful world, as we know it, is truly coming to an end.

Our Christian lives today:

- Now, if the world is ending, a better way to live, is to live like the world to come is already at hand.
- As people, who are washed and cleansed by God’s own transforming hand, we’ve already begun to be different, because of Christ living in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit guiding us rather than following our selfish motivations, which often controls us.
- We’ll see that the fruit of our ordinary faithfulness is actually the fruit of God’s kingdom coming here now in our lives, because it’s not our faithfulness to begin with.
- The purifying for all eternity, in our lives, has already begun by the work of the Holy Spirit.

- And because we don't fear the wrath to come, we get to live a remarkable life in ordinary circumstances and even in our extraordinary circumstances.
- Although we believe the world is ending, we also trust in the beauty and purity and the rightness of the New Heaven and the New Earth to come.
- So, then back to the question, "What shall we do?"
- John was asked that question three times in the passage Ed just read.
- And it's a question that many of us are asking today, as well, as we look around at the turmoil and the unrest we see in the world.
- And how many of us have circumstances in our personal lives or in our relationships which have left us asking that same question?
- It's a question we ask when life is complicated, when life is difficult and the world appears to have gone stark-raving mad.
- This question is much more than just a check list or a to-do list.
- This question reveals our sense of powerlessness and we often become scared or overwhelmed.
- When our life gets out of control and we feel helpless to fix the situation.
- Now, most of the time, we know what to do in our lives, because every day we make hundreds of decisions – big ones and little ones and even some with life lasting consequences.

We need help:

- But, when our world gets turned upside down and when we feel powerless, that's when we cry out, "What shall we do?"
- Our response should also come from that same deep place our question came from.
- Our response to that question must begin, not with what's happening around us, which is where we tend to focus, but with what's happening within us.
- It must begin with our sense of powerlessness, because if we just focus on things in the world happening around us, our response is basically limited "to fight or flight."
- Neither of which are, as John put it, "fruits worthy of repentance."
- Too often, we stereo-type, blame and act against those on our list – all Muslims, all refugees, all poor people, all RNA members, all police officers, all Democrats, all Republicans, etc.
- Now, when we do that we just become more like the evil-doers that we're trying to avoid and battle against.
- On the other hand, we can become silent and passive and deny any responsibility.
- And when we do that, we stand dangerously close to the border of indifference and the only thing worse than the evil we're fleeing is our indifference to that evil.
- In our fight or flight mode, nothing really changes, least of all – us.
- We're powerless to fight the world's situation on our terms and we're powerless to get away from this world problems and evil.
- Now, unfortunately many people will believe anything that will give them a sense of power and control over things that they otherwise feel powerless to deal with.
- Rather than giving into things that we think are going to give us the answers, hopefully our powerlessness opens us up to a new and different source of empowerment.

- Our powerlessness should now create a new possibility to connect with, as John told us, with the one who is more powerful.
- Powerlessness doesn't mean we have no choices, but rather we must make different choices.
- We may be powerless to change the world, but we can choose to change ourselves.
- We may be powerless to escape the world, but we can choose to live a different way through the help of the Holy Spirit.
- And, isn't that what John is telling those who are coming to him?
- John doesn't ask them to change the world, does he?
- But rather, he asks them to change themselves. He doesn't ask them to quit their jobs, but to do their jobs with integrity.
- The crowd that came to John could not eliminate poverty but he asked them to share what they had with the cold, with the hungry and with the homeless.
- The tax collectors, who came to John, could not change the corrupt tax system, but they could enforce it honestly.
- The soldiers, who came to John, could not end the Roman occupation, but they could act with integrity and not abuse their power.

Concluding comments:

- Now, in each of those situations, John focuses on people and on relationships.
- His answers are simple, they're concrete and they're practical.
- And for those, who want the world fixed, John's answers are not very satisfying, are they?
- Let's be honest, Jesus didn't fix the world he lived in, either.
- He gave Himself to the world, one person, one relationship, and one moment at a time.
- And then He loved the world at death and beyond.
- Jesus showed a different way of being, a different way of living, a different way of expressing priorities and values and then He invited us to participate by following Him.
- Jesus actually showed us what it means to what it looked like to be both a human being and be a dwelling place of God.
- And the beauty of this passage is that the crowd could do what John asked them to do.
- He didn't ask them to leave their families or quit their jobs, but simply invites them to join in God's kingdom by doing acts of kindness, to be a blessing to others with the blessings they have received.
- And this is an invitation that every one of us can accept s that whatever we do in life, we do it with kindness and we do it with generosity.
- And in this way, we can truly find the joy that this season so often lacks.
- Now, our gospel lectionary reading for today began with a harangue from John, but it finishes with the words of challenge and hope.
- We also need to reflect on the words of Paul in **Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord, always."**
- Now, rejoice implies that you already be "joyced" in the first place

- People, who are struggling with life's difficulties, must first be "joyced" before they can rejoice.

Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord, always. I say again, rejoice. 5) Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything."

- How is that working out for all of us?

"Do not worry about anything. But, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God. 7) And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

- Amen

[Then, Pastor Craig, along with Grace Monrovia's elders and regional director Tim Sitterley ordained Redida Edwards as a local elder and Assistant Pastor of our congregation.]