

**“Joy”**  
**By Adam H. Fronczek**

I'm so happy to see all of you this morning—Christmas is such a great time to be in church and we're almost there. The poinsettias are arriving, and Knox Music Series is next week. Today we lit the candle on the wreath that stands for “joy,” and next week we'll be ready to sing all our favorite Christmas carols. You all continue to decorate your homes and bake cookies and attend parties, and it's all so happy...unless you lost someone you loved this year and you're spending Christmas without them...or you've got a conflict within your family that is impossible to ignore when the holidays arrive...or if you've been going to Christmas parties where everyone is drinking and you're in recovery...

Christmas can be a difficult and lonely time of year. If you are having a great Christmas season and have no complaints and no room for improvement in your life, I congratulate you. But Christmas is hard for many folks, and this morning I want to talk about that for a few minutes. Even when times are good, this is an introspective season for many of us. We are all a little skeptical of the materialism and the surface level happiness all around us, and we want to find the real joy of the season. And to find that joy we often need to dig deep and do some work, or as I've heard it said, in order to find real joy, “you have to make yourself strong in your broken places” (David Brooks, University of Portland, March 2016).

So today's reading comes from a broken place—it's written from prison. It is a lesser known story about the same character we hear about every Advent, John the Baptist. In this story, John has been thrown into prison, the powers that be had quite enough of his public questioning of authority and they locked him up. Prison was no picnic in the ancient world, but it seems to have been at least humane enough that prisoners were able to send and receive messages to people on the outside. So John the Baptist, suffering in prison, and hearing that a man named Jesus is preaching good news to those who are suffering, sends a message to the man Jesus, asking: “are you the one who was promised to us—the one we've been waiting for...?”

Jesus' answer suggests that, yes, he is the one. But rather than just saying that, Jesus tells John to look at the evidence, at what he, Jesus, has been doing lately, and decide for himself.

When John asks Jesus how we're supposed to know that our Savior is coming and how we're supposed to know that he is for real, Jesus says nothing of the decorations or the candlelight services, he doesn't say, "haven't you heard, 'O Come, All Ye Faithful'—it's about me!" No, what Jesus says to John is this: "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." These are the signs, says Jesus: the poor, the blind, the leper, the lame. You know a Savior is coming not because of Christmas cheer, but because those who are suffering, isolated, and alone, they are getting noticed: it sounds like a lot of other things that you may remember Jesus saying, things like "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Prison, again? It's not without meaning that John is in prison when he sends his message to Jesus, prison is one of the most alienating and isolating circumstances in human life. Matthew, the writer of this story, is intentional about mentioning that John the Baptist writes to Jesus from prison. He is intentional about that because he wants you to know that if you feel isolated, or alone, or are searching for the real meaning of Christmas, there is someone in this season of tinsel and lights and carols who understands what's going on inside of you.

Some of the most eye-opening circumstances in my ministry have taken place in prisons. I had the chance in graduate school to take an entire semester class inside of Riverbend Maximum Security Prison, outside Nashville. We studied prison writing throughout the centuries—John the Baptist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. King—side by side with people who are incarcerated today. We did it by traveling to the prison each Tuesday night for class. The men in that class were sorrowful and regretful. They had made serious mistakes, and they knew it...and they were isolated and lonely. Prison is a lonely place to be. But they were also intelligent and insightful. They were deeply aware of what was most important to them, in a much more profound way than I usually am. These men lacked the luxuries and comforts we all experience, so they clung so much more strongly to the little things about being human—the chance to pray together, to read and study together. The opportunity on those Tuesdays to share something as simple as a smile or a handshake.

I don't mean at all to glorify their experience, for prison life is about as hard as it gets, and it gets harder all the time for more and more people, most of them black or brown, and poor. Did you know that in the last 30 years, beginning with drug legislation brought in the 1980s, the US prison population

has grown from 300,000 to over 2 million? Did you know that we now incarcerate a higher percentage of our black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid? It's not pleasant stuff to talk about on Sunday morning, but then again, when Jesus sent word to John about the poor, the blind, and the lame, he knew that stuff was unpleasant. So did you notice Jesus finished his message by saying, "and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me"? This is hard stuff to talk about. But we have to first acknowledge the broken parts of our lives and our life together if we want them to get better.

Those statistics I just read you came from a powerful book by Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. Our Knox Book Group read it last month. Alexander is one of the leading voices in our country in the fight for prison reform. And in the midst of the statistics and legal insights she shares, she never forgets the individual stories of isolation that are really the core of her holy work. In the dedication of her book, she names many audiences for whom it is written, and she closes, saying: "Last, but definitely not least, I am writing this book for all those trapped within America's latest caste system. You may be locked up or locked out of mainstream society, but you are not forgotten." (Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, Introduction.) It's a message to prisoners; but for all of us, do you see it is the essence of the message of Christmas? If you are feeling alone in some way this holiday season, the good news of the coming of Jesus is that he is not coming for the sake of those whose Christmas will "nearly be like a picture print by Currier and Ives." Christ's good news of salvation is coming first and foremost for those who need it.

Christ's love is there most of all for those who are hurting, or for those who are genuinely exploring what in their life will lead to deep and real joy.

We have a prison ministry here at Knox. The people who volunteer in our prison ministry understand the search for deep and real joy in life, the kind of joy that comes from offering a listening ear and a word of hope to those who need it most. They visit people twice a month, people who are locked up and trying to find their way through another day. Last week our prison ministry gathered and studied the same Scripture we read in worship, a story of John the Baptist. One of the members of that group shared an insight about John the Baptist and what his story has to say to all of us. John wasn't Jesus; he was a simple man, a regular human being like the rest of us, who found his deep joy in life because he recognized his limitations and trusted God to take charge of his life; he let go of his selfish ambitions and worldly desires, and through doing that he became the mouthpiece that announced the coming of Jesus—the one who would heal the sick, serve the poor, and set the prisoners free. That message was helpful to one of the prisoners in the Bible study last week, one who acknowledged that he has lost control of many things in his life, so he is going to need to put his trust in God. The setting is different, but is that not the

same for many of us? We try so hard at this time of year to create the perfect life, get everything ready, hide all of our flaws, hope that nobody gets in a fight, hope that no one sees the pain you are carrying, because they might not understand. The good news of this season, my friends, is that Jesus does see you, and understands. Jesus is the one who sends word back to John in prison and says, “do you want to know if I’m for real? “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.” Jesus sees John in prison—he sees people who are suffering. And he sees you too, struggling to make yourself strong in your broken places. He wants to walk with you, past the little things that bring surface level happiness and into the deeper places of life where real joy is found.

Our prison ministry is one of the many ways that, in this place, people are finding deep joy in service to others. If you want to hear more about it and perhaps get involved, Jim Wuenker can tell you about it. If you don’t know who Jim is, ask a few people—he’s not hard to find.

The great irony of this happy season is that it may be joyful, but it isn’t all happy, and we all know it. Think about it in the simplest of ways: all of the best Christmas stories, even from beyond the Bible, are about broken characters who dig deep, who abandon the empty chase for happiness and find real joy. Think about it: Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer—they used to laugh and call him names. The Grinch—whose heart grew three sizes that day. George Bailey—the richest man in town. They are all broken characters with something deeply troubling them, they all feel alone and isolated. In these simplest of stories, each one of them in their own way shares with John the Baptist a brokenness in their life, and a waiting for the miracle of Christmas to open them to the joy that was right in front of them all along. The Christmas story is about finding peace and love in the simple gift of a friend who cares, another person who needs help, a chance to serve others as God has loved us. The Christmas story captures the imaginations of lonely people, finding deep joy. Why not you?

Amen.

Texts:

Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-10