

Advent 3 B
John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 17, 2023

“Joyful John”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light . . . ¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the [religious leaders] sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” ²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” ²²Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” ²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

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I’m guessing that I’m not the only one who noticed that today’s text from John’s gospel sounds an awful lot like last week’s text from Mark’s gospel. It’s almost like *déjà vu*! Both texts quote a familiar sounding passage from Isaiah. Both texts point to John the Baptist as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” Both texts report that John the Baptist talked about someone else coming and that he would not even be worthy

to untie the thong of their sandal. So, what is unique about this morning's text from the Gospel According to John?

In this reading, priests and Levites from Jerusalem come to question John. This inquisition is absent from the reading we heard last week from Mark.

“Who are you?” the religious leaders asked him.

“I am not the Messiah,” he responded.

“Are you Elijah . . . Are you the prophet?”

“No,” he answered.

“Then, who are you?”

John confidently stated, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

According to John's gospel, John the Baptist knew exactly who he was...and who he was not. John was self-aware. John was self-actualized. John knew himself—knew that he was the voice of one crying out in the wilderness; the one whose job it was to prepare for the one who was yet to come. For those of us looking at John from a distance of more than 2,000 years, the camel-hair-wearing, locust-eating, honey-drinking, desert-dwelling, fire-and-brimstone-preaching Baptist, may not be best described by the word ‘happy.’ He doesn't seem particularly happy, does he? When I gave Shelley the title for my sermon last week, I did so with a certain sense of irony: “Joyful John.”

And then, on Wednesday evening during our adult study, we talked about the differences between happiness and joy. And then, I read John McKee's ethical will and the distinction he draws between what he calls happy events and the ongoing happiness of a lifetime. And I began to realize that whether or not John the Baptizer was happy, he was unmistakably filled with joy. Believe it or not, there is a difference.

When many of us hear the word ‘happiness’, we harken back to Thomas Jefferson's famous line from the declaration of independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This idea of pursuing happiness has certainly taken hold – particularly in the developed countries of the western world. Yet, despite the hold happiness seems to have on our lives and imaginations, pursuing it as we do may not yield the results we might expect. In an article from less than two years ago, we learn that:

Over the past 10 years, numerous studies have shown that our obsession with happiness and high personal confidence may be making us less content with our lives, and less effective at reaching our actual goals. Indeed, we may often be happier when we stop focusing on happiness altogether.¹

It's a good article and I encourage you to consider reading the rest of it. Ultimately, though, I'm leaning toward the point of view that happiness, rooted as it is in external circumstances, is fleeting and, if I'm honest, a fairly shallow pursuit. Joy, on the other hand, comes from within so it's more reliable and has greater depth. Joy is much more than just a happy feeling, it's, as one author puts it, "a way of being fully alive, connected, and positive even in the face of grief, pain, and struggle."²

John the Baptizer knew himself, knew his purpose, and he embraced it, connected it with others, and was unwavering even in the face of questions from the religious leaders of his day. John may not be the poster child for happiness, but John had joy. Joyful John.

¹ David Robson. "Why it's Time to Stop Pursuing Happiness," Theguardian.com, January 10, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/jan/10/why-its-time-to-stop-pursuing-happiness>.

²John van de Laar. *The Making of a Messiah*, Johannesburg: Sacredise, 2023.

Unlike happiness, though, which is the nice byproduct of experiences and circumstance, joy comes from within and it's something we choose, something we cultivate, something we live into and out of. Joy doesn't just happen to us. We have to choose it. And the truth is, it may not be an easy choice, or a natural choice in our circumstances, and it may not even be the choice we *want* to make. But it's the only choice *to* make if we want what John McKee called "a desirable state of lifetime contentment."³

Today, as we light a pink candle for joy, let's remember joyful John the Baptist and joyful John McKee. Let's remember that a life of joy doesn't mean a life of perpetual happiness, it means lifetime contentment. Let's remember to choose joy, this and every day. Amen.

³ John McKee. "My Ethical Will: Happiness," July, 2020.