

“A New Heart for Christmas”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

12 December 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Ezekiel 36:22-28

Luke 3:7-18

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

- Ezekiel 36:26

Prayer

**God who gives us the Christmas story,
Prepare our hearts to receive your Word for us this morning.**

May we hear your voice like a descant –

High above the melody line of our busy holiday traditions –

**So our hearing may inspire us to praise you with our strength, soul and mind
And live lives worthy of the mystery of the Incarnation. Amen.**

Last Sunday, while we lit the Advent Candle of Peace in the safety of our sanctuary, Pope Francis visited the Island of Lesbos to show his solidarity with thousands of migrants and asylum seekers, mostly from the Middle East and Africa, who have been living in the European-Union-funded Greek refugee camp for as long as six years. Speaking directly to the refugees, the Pope said, ***“Sisters and brothers, your faces and your eyes beg us not to look the other way, not to deny our common humanity.”*** To the European political establishment, Pope Francis pointed out their indifference in the face of an ongoing humanitarian crisis. “[Stop] ***this shipwreck of civilization!***” Francis pleaded with European politicians. ***“It is easy to stir up public opinion by instilling fear of others. Yet why do we fail to speak with equal vehemence about the exploitation of the poor, about seldom-mentioned but often well-financed wars, about economic agreements where the people have to pay...?... The remote causes should be attacked, not the poor people who pay the consequences and are even used for political propaganda... Let us stop ignoring reality, stop constantly shifting responsibility, stop passing off the issue of migration to others, as if it mattered to no one and was only a pointless burden to be shouldered by somebody else!”*** Then the Pope leaned on the faith of Christians worldwide and spoke boldly as a pastor, a prophet and a follower of Christ, ***“I ask God to rouse us from our disregard for those who are suffering, to shake us from an individualism that excludes others, to awaken hearts that are deaf to the needs of our neighbors. I ask every man and woman, all of us, to overcome the paralysis of fear, the indifference that kills, the cynical disregard that nonchalantly condemns to death those on the fringes!... faith demands compassion and mercy. Let us not forget that this is God’s style: closeness, compassion and tenderness.”***¹

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Pope Francis' words on Lesbos echoed his homily on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees last September in which he challenged Christians around the world to work toward what he eloquently called "***the miracle of an even wider 'we'.***"²

This miracle or at least the stubborn longing for it lies at the heart of Advent. Forget the chocolate behind the little windows on the Advent calendar. Forget the strings of light and the stockings on the mantle. Forget the relentless, almost insufferable, cheerfulness of the holiday songs, Santa, or the presents underneath the Christmas tree. The season of Advent, this sacred time of preparation for Christmas, is an invitation to you and me to reflect theologically on how our faith in the Incarnation makes it imperative that we hold sacred the humanity of every person on earth. Advent demands that we face the theological scandal at the core of Christmas, which is that the God of the universe took human form, became incarnate in the body of a poor brown-skinned first century Middle Eastern Jewish baby, and dwelt among us. This child born in Bethlehem with a soft spot on his head who had a cow trough for his cradle, Christians have affirmed for almost 2,000 years, made God's love for all human beings inescapably tangible. The theology of the Incarnation affirms that God became one of us because God loves everything about our beautiful, complicated, earthy, broken, dangerous, fragile, brilliant, good, bad and mortal flesh. The most stunning and precious idea that Advent asks you and me to consider is that the Incarnation gives us the theological muscle to look in the eye of every person and see not a stranger and an outsider, but a neighbor; someone whom God loves so much that God gave us Christmas. What makes Christmas joyful and salvific is exactly this intellectually troubling mystery of God becoming incarnate and living in the world like one of us to reveal God's hope that every person may know the wideness of God's compassion, acceptance, and tender love. And if God loves the world so much to come to it in the life of a poor and helpless child, we who believe in the story can do no less than take the Incarnation seriously and, with hearts overflowing with the joy of Christmas, work together toward that "***miracle of an even wider 'we'.***"

Joy! Christmas joy. The joy of the Incarnation. The joy of Emmanuel – God-with-us. This is the liturgical theme on the Third Sunday of Advent. On every other Sunday in Advent, we light a purple candle in the Advent wreath except for this morning. Today, the Latin word "***Gaudete***," which means "*joy or rejoice*" defines the spiritual mood of church services throughout the world. Based on Paul's pastoral advice to the Philippians, "***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... The Lord is near,***"³ *Gaudete* Sunday fills the Church with anticipatory joy for the celebration of Christ's birth. This is the Sunday to praise God with a loud voice for the joyous message of Christmas. Last Sunday, our opening hymn invited us to approach the mystery of the Incarnation with silence and reverence, "***Let all mortal flesh keep silence;***" this morning, we sang out our joy uninhibitedly, "***Joy to the world! The Lord is come... Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing.***" On *Gaudete* Sunday, we light the pink candle, not because a sassy priest sometime in the Middle Ages decided that the clergy should wear pink vestments on the third Sunday of Advent or because Mary really wanted a baby girl as it has been suggested, but because the

liturgical bright rose color challenges all of us to take at least one Sunday before Christmas Day to look at our own lives and ask ourselves if we can sense and feel the joyful essence of Christmas in our hearts.

Last Sunday, I said that our preparation for Christmas begins in the desert where the scraggy, wild-eyed, and sharp-tongued John the Baptist appeared unarmed and alone in a world dominated by the Caesars of Rome, the Herods of Palestine and the High-Priests of Jerusalem calling on God's people to open their hearts to the only true power in the universe, turn their lives around and prepare the way of the Lord. In the Gospels, John comes across as an affront to any congregation of polite, well-adjusted, and sophisticated people. John the Baptist is probably the only person in the Christmas story that does not sound too joyful. It's no wonder that he doesn't have a place in our Christmas pageants. The Baptizer was odd. He looked and preached like a feral man. John had the unenviable tendency to say unsettling truths. His preaching was too honest, and he did not choose his words too carefully. Imagine how you would react if Rick Barnes, the Welcoming Deacon this morning, greeted you in the Baptizer's style: **"Welcome to the worship service, you brood of vipers!"** No, John the Baptist is not the preacher we want to hear on *Gaudete* Sunday. He is more like a bull in a China shop. He has no time for social pleasantries or the hollow platitudes of religious traditions. His words: Prepare! Make Straight! Repent! Snakes! Winnowing fork. Unquenchable fire – do not seem to jive well with any of the Advent candles we lit this morning. They do not sound too hopeful or peaceful and much less joyful. So, what is John doing here today? Why are we listening to his disconcerting message on the Sunday of Joy?

What many people in the pews of Protestant churches do not know and have a hard time believing is that John the Baptizer is the patron saint of spiritual joy. The Gospel of Luke tells us that John leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of the voice of the young, unmarried, and pregnant Mary.⁴ John embraced his call to be an Advent preacher, a preparer for the arrival of Christ, wholeheartedly and when the time came for him to make space for Jesus' ministry, John said, "[My] **joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.**"⁵ Joy was at the heart of John's life, his faith, and, if we look closely, joy was at the core of his preaching and ministry as well.

John the Baptist was an intelligent, caring, very perceptive, and brave preacher who was well-versed in the ancient teachings of the Hebrew prophets. In today's passage, John may sound like a scowling misanthrope who used his sermons as a blistering attack on the people who flocked to the Jordan banks to be baptized. The truth though is that the Baptizer loved the motley rabble of religious and doubtful, rich and poor people, tax collectors and soldiers that gathered around him in the wilderness. He took great joy in that miracle of a wider and radically inclusive humanity that surrounded him in the desert.

"Don't think for a moment that your ethnic background, your blood and genes, your family pedigree, your national identity, or your religion can save you,"

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John told the people who came together to listen to his hard-hitting sermons, ***“What really matters is what you do and how you live. If you want to prepare the way of the Lord, bear fruits worthy of repentance!”***

John the Baptist was not at all interested in offering the people he loved a warm and fuzzy message about heavenly peace and silent nights when all is quiet, all is calm. He respected the seekers who sought him out too much to ask them to sit around and be content with a sedate religion of vague happiness. The crowds had come to him, and John knew it in his heart, yearning for salvation, for a fundamental change, for a whole new life and John would not give them a shallow religious experience that left them undisturbed and unchanged. John never doubted that the people he loved could rise to the challenge of working toward the ***“miracle of a wider ‘we’.”*** John the Baptist did not think for one second that those human beings in search of a new life were too frail to change or too sinful to do better or too constrained by their individualism that they could not leap for joy at the possibility of re-learning how to be human and faithful to God. John invited them to engage in a robust practice of self-reflection. He asked them to look at the ways, big and small, that they were complicit with the powers that diminish the humanity of others, and he told his followers to produce fruits of repentance.

In the original Greek, the word “repentance” means ***“to change your mind for the better.”*** In Latin, it means ***“to feel so grieved over the past as to develop a new course of conduct.”*** In his message this morning, John was calling on his listeners to become experts on how to change the direction of their lives. How to be different. How to gladly act in a whole new way when they returned to their homes and jobs and to their daily lives. It is surprising, especially for 21st century Christians who still think that Christianity is about beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas, but John said to his congregation that the fruits of repentance are disarmingly simple and strikingly accessible to everyone. Stop buying more than you need. If you have two coats, give one away to someone who has none. Stop hoarding. If you have food, end hunger by sharing your abundance with the world. Stop taking advantage of your position of political, economic, military, and religious power to exploit the poor and perpetuate inequality. Be glad at everything you already have.

Without a change of heart and a change in behavior, John knew that faith falls flat, hope fades away, peace grows distant, love is hollow, and Christmas is just a holiday beautifully wrapped with the sentimentality and romanticism of our religious and secular traditions. Without repentance, our hearts grow cold and indifferent to the common humanity we share with one another. So, John borrowed liberally from the wisdom of the prophet Ezekiel and sprinkled the water of baptism on the people, praying that God might remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh. And in his usual raw honesty, John told the people who were filled with expectations and ready to be baptized that repentance and a new heart of flesh come with strings attached. The baptism of the Incarnation comes with the Holy Spirit, the winnowing-fork, and the unquenchable fire.

This is the kind of language that makes Christian moderates and liberals squirm in their seats, but we often misinterpret John's words. The desert preacher who turned the wilderness into a welcoming place of human encounters without any distinction or walls to segregate people was not, all of a sudden, saying that the Incarnation divides humankind into wheat and chaff, the saved and the damned, into people headed to heaven and those who would burn in hell for all eternity. No, John never stopped believing and rejoicing in the joyful vision of a "we" that encompasses all human beings. In his sermon, the winnowing-fork and the unquenchable fire are instruments of God's love and not of God's wrath. As one commentator said, ***"Every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) use wind to separate these husks — collectively known as 'chaff' — from the grain, the goal being, of course, to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain. This is a metaphor of cleansing and preservation, not division. What the wind and fire remove are the 'husks': the anxieties, self-absorption, apathy, or greed that make us less generous, less fair, or less respectful of others."***⁶

Having our husks removed and burned is a painful process of personal and spiritual transformation. But John insists that Christmas begins in the desert, takes us to Bethlehem, but then the Spirit of the Incarnation comes and brings the wind and fire, not to destroy, but to separate all that holds us back from a wider "we" from the Christmas joy that gives us a heart transplant. The wind and the fire of the Spirit liberate us from our husks so that the wheat in us — everything that allows us to have a heart of flesh — can be saved. This is why Luke calls John's preaching Good News. The removal of our husks frees us to have hearts open to hope, reshaped by peace, enlarged by love and ready to rejoice in our humanity made holy by the Incarnation.

Friends, Christmas is not the final destination of our Advent journey; a new heart of flesh that can rejoice in the mystery of the Incarnation is what Advent asks us to prepare for. Christmas begins in the desert, but the Incarnation takes us back to our families, our jobs, to our troubled world where vaccines have divided the country and people are still fighting over a woman's right to abortion and anxiety about breakthrough infections is high and planning for the year-end holidays is more stressful than we had anticipated. Robert Jones, CEO and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute, said with alarm that this Advent season has become the most "anger-filled" time of the year.⁷ Everywhere someone is frustrated and angry about something. Thanks be to God for John the Baptist whose words this morning shake us from our distractions and anxieties and call on us to repent. To stop what we are doing and give our lives a better direction. To prepare a joyful room for Christ in our hearts.

Last week, I was thinking about Pope Francis' prayerful message on Lesbos. Like John the Baptist, Francis was praying that you and I might get a heart of flesh that cares, loves, and feels the pain and yearnings that other human beings feel. Pope Francis' message echoed what John the Baptist preached today, that our joy cannot be complete until it is shared with other human beings.

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My prayer for you on this Sunday of Joy is that you may make every effort to cultivate the joy of Christmas in your life and share your joy with someone who needs to hear that you believe they can do better, change, and live more fully. As we make our hearts ready for Christmas, I hope that you will look in the eyes of strangers around you and see in them someone whom God loves and for whom God gave us the Christmas story. I pray that you may get a new heart, a heart of flesh, for Christmas; a heart big and strong and joyful enough to make you believe in the miracle of an ever widening “we” in our church, in your home, in Acton, in America and in the world. I pray that you will let the sacred fire of the Spirit burn your husks so everything that is beautiful, good, priceless, and truly human in you may be saved.

C.S. Lewis once said, “***Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.***”⁸ The story begins in the desert, goes to Bethlehem, sprinkles us with the waters of baptism, gives us a new heart of flesh and then sends us out into the world ready to sabotage the anger-filled and stony-hearted structures of power in our history with the joy of real human hearts that still believe in that life-saving possibility of a wider “we.”

Friends, rejoice! I will say it again, praise God and rejoice for the Lord is come! Alleluia! May you have a new heart for Christmas.

¹ Pope Francis’ address at the migrant reception and identification center in Mytilene, on the Greek island of Lesbos, 05 December 2021 - [<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/12/05/pope-francis-lesbos-greece-migration-refugees-speech-241969>].

² Pope Francis’ homily for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees held on 26 September 2021 on the theme: “Towards an ever wider ‘we’” - [<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/05/06/210506a.html>].

³ Philippians 4:4-5.

⁴ Luke 1:41.

⁵ John 3:29-30.

⁶ By Matthew Myer Boulton in JOY, WIND & FIRE: SALT’S LECTIONARY COMMENTARY FOR ADVENT WEEK THREE, Salt, 06 December 2021.

⁷ By Robert P. Jones in It's the Most "Anger-Filled" Time of the Year?, White too Long Newsletter, 11 December 2021.

⁸ C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity, p. 45 [Kindle Edition].