

# The Hard Work of Joy

Luke 3:7-20

Farmville Baptist Church

December 12, 2021

As you know, I'm about two weeks into my service here as pastor at Farmville Baptist. That means I'm still getting to know everyone, and everyone's still getting to know me. So as I get into my sermon this morning, I have a "get to know you" question: does anyone in the congregation binge-watch television shows? Maybe you catch the marathon of your favorite show on cable, like my parents watching Gunsmoke and the Lone Ranger. Or maybe you have a subscription to Netflix or Hulu or some other streaming service – and you like to watch episode after episode of your favorite show. Does anyone here do that?

We do in the Tyler household. Cadance and I have shows we like to binge on our own, apart from each other, and we have shows we like to binge together. I am almost hesitant to say it, but our children have picked up the habit; Jonathan could watch episode after episode of Star Wars, and Phoebe is obsessed with Peppa Pig. The Tylers are a binge-watching family.

Over Thanksgiving, I binged a new show, or at least a new-to-me show. The show was *Ted Lasso*. Has anyone here seen it? Other than the language, I can definitely recommend it, because it's a show with great acting, good storylines, and a message that is both positive and relatable. Humor, drama, music, romance, sports – it's got a little of everything. It's good enough that I watched all twenty-two episodes out so far in just a few days.

One of the background characters on the show is a soccer player named Danny Rojas. From the start, you know that this young man has a really positive outlook on life. He has a smile on his face almost constantly, he is always looking at people from the most optimistic perspective, and he seems to truly see life as a joy – especially when he is playing soccer ~~and he really loves it.~~

In one of the first-season episodes, the team's marketing specialist is helping players figure out what endorsement deals they should choose. One says he'd like to promote ~~his~~ shoes, one asks for opportunities to represent environmentally-responsible businesses, one says he really wants to be the celebrity spokesman for the chocolate candy Rollos. When Danny comes in, though, he stumps the marketing specialist. She asks him, a little dumbfounded, "The product you'd most like to get into business with

is...joy?" When Danny confirms this, she says, "I don't know if I can get you paid for that." Danny smiles and says, "I like to give away joy for free!"<sup>1</sup> He leaves the meeting and goes on his carefree, happy way.

I imagine most, if not all, of us know someone like Danny Rojas. We might even resemble him a bit ourselves – seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, going through life with a smile, thinking the best of others, and wanting other people to have the same happiness we have. This is one way we think of the quality that Danny wanted to give away for free – joy. But sometimes that understanding of joy doesn't quite grasp the totality of what true joy is, and it can set us up to be greatly discouraged when life becomes difficult or the world around us changes. Because, hard as it may be for us to grasp, John the Baptist may be a better

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<sup>1</sup> *Ted Lasso*, season 1, episode 8

guide for us about what living a joyful life looks like than  
Danny Rojas.

Now, I know it probably didn't cross any of our minds when we first heard the passage I read just a few moments ago that this was a passage about joy. After all, John comes off a little bit heated – well, let's be honest, he seems angry. He has all of these crowds flocking out to hear his message and follow his teaching – and he starts off saying, “You brood of vipers!” That's a real leadership technique right there, let me tell you. Calling a bunch of people wanting to listen to you a nest of snakes is really recommended practice number one in “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” It strikes us as a bit antagonistic, of course – and it did then, too.

John continues: “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” It's almost like he doesn't want these people

to hear his message and maybe heed the word from God! If I didn't know better, I'd say John was kind of like that other well-known Jewish prophet, Jonah, who was so committed to his hatred of the people of Nineveh that he heard God's call and ran in the other direction. John, at first glance, seems to at least be pondering whether or not he really wants this crowd of people to hear his message. He's off-putting, to say the least – and it's hard to see someone with this sort of attitude, who has withdrawn from worldly pleasures and lives in the wilderness, being a prophet, a herald, of joy. At least, I find it a bit tough. Do you?

I was helped out a bit this week, though, when I was reading a book by Henri Nouwen alongside my morning devotions. I don't know if anyone here has ever encountered Henri Nouwen before, but he is a writer who helps me connect with God and understand my faith better.

~~John the Baptist~~s. And this week, he's helping me understand joy. In his book *Following Jesus*, he notes that "joy is not an easy subject to articulate," suggesting that we struggle with it because "maybe we experience joy more often than we think. Maybe joyful living is what we are about. Maybe it is so normal that we don't need to talk about it."<sup>2</sup> And what is so normal is that life is always changing, and Nouwen suggests "joy is life because life means something is moving away from the old static places to new dynamic places."<sup>3</sup>

Say what you will about John the Baptist's sermons in the wilderness, but he was definitely saying a change was going to come. He begins his ministry embracing the role of the preparer of the way. He explicitly told those who came

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<sup>2</sup> Nouwen, *Following Jesus*, 92 & 95

<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, 96

out to hear him in the desert, wondering if he was God's chosen deliverer, that "one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." That this one to come would bring the purifying fire of the Spirit with a winnowing fork in his hand was not a detriment to the hopes of those who heard him; no, John's fiery depiction of God's justice-oriented future was a great uplifting message to those who heard him and suffered under Roman oppression, the Temple system of economic manipulation, and the prevailing situation that saw most people living hand to mouth. John was proclaiming a changing reality, and it was, quite literally, good news.

In the next couple of weeks, we'll hear more about that good news – good news that Mary sang about that made her spirit rejoice in God her Savior, and good news of great joy that the angels proclaimed to the peasant fieldhands keeping

watch over the sheep on one very special night. The good news was that a change was coming, a new path, a new kingdom, a new world was at hand. Something was happening that meant Immanuel – God is with us. And that person embodying God with us, Jesus, the one whose sandals John was unworthy to untie, that man was a man of great joy.

What did his joy look like? It was a joy intimately tied to his closeness with God. Rooted in the love of his father, close to the thoughts of God's heart, committed to the way of life of the age of eternity, Jesus embodies joy, true joy.

Henri Nouwen describes it this way: "Jesus is talking about a deep sense of belonging. A deep listening. *Obedience* means listening with your whole body. *Obaudire* in Latin means careful listening. Jesus is the obedient one. He is always listening to the Father. He is always connected to

the source from where he comes.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus embodies joy by being connected to God and following the way of God.

It is important to note before we move on that this doesn't always mean Jesus was happy. There were significant moments in Jesus' life when we sense that happiness is the farthest thing from his mind – when he is angered in the Temple, when he grows frustrated with his disciples, when he weeps over the intransigence of Jerusalem, when he is in pain on the cross. Nouwen reminds us, “The experience of joy that Jesus offers is not happiness. It is not just feeling ‘up.’ Joy is something else.”<sup>5</sup>

I don't know about you, but that's good news to me. You see, I'm <sup>usually</sup> a pretty happy guy. I enjoy good health and have a beautiful family. I have a job that I love and that I believe

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<sup>4</sup> Nouwen 100-101

<sup>5</sup> Nouwen 101

makes a difference in the world. I have friends that matter to me. But there are lots of times I don't feel happy. I get frustrated. I get tired. I get ticked off. I get confused. I get sad about something that is worth getting sad about – and then sometimes I get sad about something ~~that~~<sup>and</sup> I don't know why it makes me sad. I experience sorrow in life. Do you?

The joy Jesus offers us isn't tied to our emotional state, something we only experience when we're happy. "Joy is a gift that is there even when we are sorrowful, even when we are in pain, even when things are difficult in our lives. The joy that Jesus offers is a joy that exists in very, very difficult situations [...] joy is embracing sorrow and happiness, pain and pleasure. It is deeper, fuller. It is more. It is something that remains with us. It is something of God that is very profound. [...] The joy of God is never going to leave us."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nouwen, 102-103

How, then, can we access that kind of God-given joy?  
How can we center our lives, root our lives in the joy of God?  
For that, I suggest we turn back to the words of John. When he warned the crowd what was likely to come, they sensibly asked him, “What should we do then?” His response: do the things that are consistent with the ways of God. In other words, be obedient. “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”<sup>7</sup> To tax collectors, for whom it was widely accepted<sup>able</sup> to fleece their customers, he said, “don’t collect any more than you are required to.”<sup>8</sup> And to soldiers, known for their heavy-handed policing and abuse of their power, he said, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.”<sup>9</sup> All of this could be

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 3:11

<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:13

<sup>9</sup> Luke 3:14

summed up with a phrase he used early in the passage:  
produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

That's an important word. He was preaching a baptism of repentance, after all – a turning from the way of this world to the way of God. If his listeners are to do that, it requires some actions, some deeds, some changed behavior. It means focusing on generosity towards others instead of hoarding for self. It means refusing to take advantage of others for your own benefit, even if it is allowed or acceptable. It means considering the safety and health of those you have power over and refusing to exploit or abuse them. It means intentionally becoming rooted and grounded in the love of Christ – the one who taught us to “do unto others what you would have them do unto you” – instead of falling into the routine of the status quo or letting fear or apathy lead us into despair or cynicism.

Does this mean that every moment of every day will be rosy and happy? No. John knew that better than any of us; the passage ends with him going to jail for bearing witness to the truth about the corrupt and blasphemous local king. For doing what God called him to do, he suffered and, eventually, <sup>he was</sup> ~~he was~~ executed. But John knew the joy of God. He knew how to be obedient to his call and find fulfillment and purpose in the kingdom life. John belonged to his Lord, and because he belonged, he listened, he obeyed, and he invited others to obey. And for him, that was joy.

We know this because John himself told us. Over in the Gospel of John – a different John – we find that the <sup>prophet</sup> ~~prophet~~ in the wilderness kept baptizing people ~~for~~ after Jesus came and began his ministry; he wasn't thrown into prison for a little while. But as he kept preaching and baptizing, his followers noticed the crowds were starting to thin out. Some

of them came to John and asked him about it, assuming he might be a bit out of sorts. But John didn't seem bothered at all. Instead, he told his disciples, "A person can receive only what is given from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."<sup>10</sup>

John had discovered the path of following Jesus, the path of true communion with God. It was the path of more than right belief; it was the path of obedient action. Only when we live out what we believe, what we've committed ourselves to, will we discover the true joy that transcends

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<sup>10</sup> John 3:27-30

happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. Only then will we discover the peaceful joy that comes from deep communion with God in word and in deed. Only when we let God do the hard work of joy in us, and join our hard work with him by bearing the active fruit of repentance, will that joy fully take root and fill our existence. This Advent, let us seek the joy of God. Let us obediently follow the way of Christ. Let us commune with our Lord. Let us pray.