

2024 12 15 – *Starry Nights: Total Eclipse*

Scripture: Luke 3:7-18 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Using exhortations like this,

John proclaimed the Good News to the people.

On Tuesday afternoon at our Advent Study, I finished reading these words to the group and they all looked at me with puzzled looks on their faces. How could snakes and wrath and unquenchable fire equate to “Good News” and what on earth did they have to do with this week’s theme of “Joy?” No doubt, many of you have similar questions on your minds after listening to Marilyn read today’s scripture.

John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was in the desert, living near the shore of the Jordan River. It was there that the people came to him, looking to be baptized. They came searching for a closer relationship with their God. When they got there, what they heard was John preaching a baptism of repentance where repentance meant a change of mind, a change of heart and a change of living.

I’m sure we’ve all been through those times in our lives when we have felt estranged from God. They may have been times when we went down a wrong path and found ourselves in a dark place. They may have been times when something happened to us and we were hurt or scared. They may have been times when we have been oppressed or depressed. Sometimes when we are in

these dark, joyless places, we can feel abandoned, alone. It is at these times that we need to turn to God. Sometimes we make this turn because we are looking for forgiveness, sometimes we need to be healed, but always it is because we are in need of a change of heart, of mind, of living.

The first thing that John pointed out was that repentance doesn't really have anything to do with being a member of a particular ethnic group or religious denomination. Many of the people who came to him were Jewish, descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but John said, "God can raise children for Sarah and Abraham from these very stones." This lineage does not make you special. Don't think that believing something or being a part of something is true repentance. What's really important is the change within you. What's really important are your actions. What's really important is producing "good fruit."

I always think of this as a two-step process. First, we need to reach out to the Holy Mystery and we can do that in many ways: by praying in whatever form works for us, by talking to someone we trust, by coming to worship, by joining a coffee, study or maybe even an AA group. Once we have made that turn, once we have created a place of safety and support in our lives, then it is possible to make real changes in our hearts and our minds and to start producing "good fruit."

So what are these good fruits? John gives some wonderful examples: sharing what we have with others, doing honest work, being fair. I would add even simple acts of caring like sending a note, offering a smile or visiting the elderly.

Also sharing our talents and abilities as volunteers; the giving of our time to people and organizations who need our help. This is what turning to God, what healing and transformation are all about.

As I was reading this part of today's scripture I couldn't help but think of the famous Charles Dicken's story, *A Christmas Carol*. It is, of course, the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man described by Dickens as "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner." This is a man in need of repentance, a man in need of a change of heart, mind and living. Through the story, as we watch the visitors that come to Scrooge in his dreams, we are able to see an amazing transformation take place. We are able to experience with Ebenezer Scrooge the joy that is his as he shifts from a mindset of scarcity to a mindset of abundance, as he discovers that joy of giving and living.

This opportunity for transformation, this gift of new life is the Good News that John is sharing with the people of Judea. But he goes even further and announces the coming of Jesus, the One who will "baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire." John explains that Jesus' baptisms will have the capability to blow the chaff from the wheat and then burn it in "unquenchable fire." We need to remember that farmers separate the chaff in order to preserve the best of each grain of wheat. In this metaphor we are all grains of wheat. We are all going to lose the chaff in our lives that is keeping us from joyful living. This is not a threat of separation and exclusion but rather a promise of an even deeper transformation for every one of us.

Of course, joy is a somewhat fleeting experience. When times are difficult it is very hard to imagine having joy in our lives. But during our Advent Study this year we have been reminded that even in the dark of the night sky there are thousands of beautiful points of sparkling light. Darkness is not always a bad thing. Our opening hymn today reminded us that new life often comes from the dark: from the womb, from the tomb and even from a manger in a stable. Joy can be found even in the most difficult of times, joy can be found in the night sky.

In fact, at this week's Advent Study we were reminded that we can even be "blinded by the light." If you think about it, during the day, when the light of the sun fills the sky, we are unable to see all those shining stars. It's only when an eclipse of the sun takes place that the day darkens enough for us to see the stars that were there all along. Like the stars, other signs of God's abundance, signs of joy, are best seen in the dark. Sometimes we need that total eclipse to remind us of the joy that is with us always. <https://www.saltproject.org/advent-store>

One way to feel joy is to remind ourselves of all those things in our lives that create a feeling of joy within us. This is especially important in those times in our lives when joy seems to be missing. I'm going to share with you an exercise that we did at this week's Advent Study and it's one that you may want to try with your friends and family this Christmas season. We started with the letter A and went around the table, with each person saying something that brings them joy and starts with their letter. For example the first person might say "Animals" for A and the second person "Baking" for B.

Let's give it a try. What brings you joy and starts with the letter "A?" Feel free to say your answer. What about "B" and "C"? The variety of answers will amaze you. You may even be surprised by the words that pop into your own head. Just being reminded of all these moments of joy in our lives can bring us to a joyful place.

May we all know the joy that comes from turning to God and experiencing a change of mind, heart and life. May we know the joy of experiencing a sense of abundance in our lives and sharing that abundance with others. May we know the joy that comes from the dark, a total eclipse, a starry night sky.

May it be so. Amen.