

Jeffrey A. Johnson
Peace Lutheran Church
Holbrook, Arizona
Advent 3
December 16, 2018

TEXT: Luke 3:7-18

It had only been a month—32 days to be exact—since the end of our *Christmas Bazaar* and there were still boxes sitting around my office and the classroom needing to be sorted. Oh, I had intended to do it right away but then, well...you know how it goes. Other priorities trump the sorting out and putting away of the *Christmas Bazaar* items and so the boxes sat there—ugly and interfering with access to file cabinets and other things but, well...you know how it goes.

But last Wednesday, I had had enough. I woke up Wednesday morning with the determination to get that junk organized and my office and the classroom back in some kind of order. And so I stripped the fellowship room tables of their decorations, pulled them together and started to unpack those boxes. I found...

- crayons...crayons...and more crayons
- colored pencils, markers and more crayons
- a half bottle of Mountain Dew
- coffee creamer
- stale and hard-as-rock cinnamon rolls
- hey! How about \$4? Finders keepers, right? (Put in offering plate.)
- a little bag of oranges
- a pretty nice water bottle
- and did I mention crayons?

I found a lot of good stuff in those boxes—and I found a lot of junk too, enough to fill a whole black trash bag. I found a lot of vintage and valuable stuff which we need to market somehow in order to get a fair price. E-bay, maybe? (Any of you want to take that on?) You know, it took me about three hours total to tend to all that stuff but, do you know how many hours I've spent thinking

that I should do it? Looking at those boxes and feeling disgusted? Moving a box to get at something I really needed? Thinking, “I really need to do something about those boxes?” If you added it all up, it would be a lot more time than the three hours it took me to do the job. And I felt terrific when it was done—relieved, pleased, satisfied!

This morning, John the Baptist calls the people of his time—and because the Bible is the living word of God—John continues to call to us today, as well, urging us to repentance. John voice is calling out to us this morning urging us to deal with the junk in our lives, all the “boxes” that are taking up space in our hearts and minds. John is saying, “Folks, clean out your lives, get rid of the trash—the hard cinnamon rolls, the dried up pens, the half-used and flat bottles of mountain dew and all the color crayons—get rid of it all and experience the joy of a clean and orderly heart. We call it peace. We call it joy.

This third Sunday of Advent, traditionally, is called (show on screen) *Gaudete Sunday*—*gaudete* is the Latin word for rejoice, a word that we heard several times in our Epistle text today, if you recall. Rejoice! Traditional Advent wreaths, as we showed in our opening slide, would always have three purple candles and one pink candle. Some of you will remember this, right? Well, that pink candle was always lit on this third Sunday during Advent, symbolizing joy—and welcome change from the austere, more sober and penitential purple candles of the remainder of the season.

And why do we rejoice on this day? Because it feels so good to repent, to get the junk cleared out of our lives, to “come clean”—and realize that God still loves us. I felt so good after getting all those boxes and all that...crap...out of my office, I simply smiled. It feels good to come clean—whether cleaning out an office or a vehicle or a closet—or a life. Repentance is not fun when you’re in the process of it but oh, the relief, the joy of coming clean, putting out the trash and starting over fresh.

As a pastor I’ve had the privilege of listening to many people come clean. I’ve sat in my office with people, in a restaurant, in a car, while walking in the woods—and heard some disturbing things, some dirty and awful and terribly sad things as people started to clean out their boxes, sort

out their junk and dispose of a lot of garbage. Even though I don't like hearing these things, I call it a privilege to be used by God in this process of helping others come clean. They need to clean house—and repentance is the way to do it. (And I certainly include myself in that, too; I need to repent as well.) Repentance is hard work, embarrassing work, often emotional and shame-evoking work. But it needs to be done if we're ever to know the joy that comes on the other side of coming clean.

John called the crowds who came out to the Jordan to see him a “*brood of vipers.*” (3:7). That's what we are as unrepentant people: we are a mass of toxic people ready to strike and poison all around us with our dirty, unrepentant hearts and forked tongues. And we writhe and we twist things around to cover up our sin and, if we can, blame others. And oh how we make excuses for ourselves! Well, I do this nasty thing or say these awful words because someone else led me to it, it's in my genes, I had a bad upbringing, I'm just weak in that area, I'm not as bad as so-and-so. The excuses go on-and-on.

The people of John's day had excuses for not repenting, too—and John, never one to mince words--called them on it. “*Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father...’*” You see the Jews of John's day felt that somehow, because they had Abraham's blood coursing through their veins, they were exempt from God's judgment. And we may feel that, too, when we say, “Well, at least I go to church...” or “Well, at least I'm not as bad as Joe over here...” We make these stupid excuses, somehow thinking that God will overlook my faults, my sins because, well... But John brooks none of that nonsense. John, looking over at a pile of rocks, says, “Don't think your pedigree, your education, your ancestry is going to save you. *God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*” In other words, you ain't such hot stuff. No, siree.

Well then, where's the good news, where's the joy, in this harsh condemnation of John's? It's what I said: Repent! Come clean! Stop making excuses for yourself. Man up to your sin—and find God's forgiveness and the joy of a clean heart in so doing. The prophet Zephaniah said in his lesson to us this morning (project on screen): “*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart...*” Why? Because “*the Lord has taken away the judgments against you...*” Did you hear that? “*The Lord has taken away the judgments against you...*” Oh,

we're guilty! Without question there are boxes of junk cluttering up our lives! Oh, there's a ton of trash to sort through and dispose of! But when that's all done...Sing! Rejoice! Exult! Because "*The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.*" Later in that Zephaniah passage, the prophet says this (project on screen): "*I will change their shame into praise.*" That's what I want, don't you? My shame turned into praise. He says, "*I will bring you home.*" Home. Not homeless. Not cast off. Not unwelcome. But, "*I will bring you home.*"

Oh you see, sisters and brothers, it is never God's desire to leave us wallowing in our sin, to have us buried beneath our junk, to have us confused and anxious about all the stuff of our lives. No, he wants to free us from all that so we can experience the joy and the peace of clean hearts and orderly lives. And so God invites us this morning, through the words of John the Baptist, to repent—to come clean, to clean house. And in so doing, to experience joy.

May I suggest that when you come to communion this morning, you use that occasion as a time to repent? As you're coming forward, as you kneel, when you receive the bread in your hand and taste the wine or grape juice on your lips, you use it as an occasion to say, "O God, I'm sorry. Please, take away the trash. I want to be clean." And then walk away smiling—because you can take-it-to-the-bank that He's forgiven you. You're clean. Rejoice!

Our joy, however, while precious and beautiful, isn't given to us solely for our sakes. You see, God is not a selfish God and He doesn't want us to be either. He wants us to then share this joy, share this peace, share the good news of forgiveness and starting over with the rest of humanity. John the Baptist puts it this way (project on screen): *Bear fruits worthy of repentance.*" He goes on to flesh this out (project on screen): "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*" To the tax collectors he said, "*Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.*" In other words, don't cheat. To the soldiers he said, "*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.*" In other words, be honest, be fair, be a man or woman of integrity. Let your lives reflect God's goodness so that others, looking at your life will see something different than what they see in the lives of those who do not know God. Jesus put it this way (project on screen): "*Let your light so*

shine before others that they might see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:16)

So my clean office and our clean classroom are not just to be admired for their orderliness. They’ve been cleaned and organized not just so people can see, “Wow, that’s a clean office. That’s a nice looking classroom.” No, they’ve been sorted through and organized so that God’s work can be done all the more effectively in those rooms: people can be counseled without distraction, plans can be made without interference. Material can be found. Classes can be taught more effectively. The beauty of the Gospel can be communicated more effectively and productively. I didn’t clean out those rooms in order to post a “Do not trespass” sign. No, I cleaned out those rooms in order that God’s work can be accomplished more fruitfully.

When we repent, when we come clean of our sins—yes, we experience joy and peace. But that’s not all God expects of us: to bask in our self-contentment. No, grounded in the joy and peace of a clean and forgiven life, we are to engage with our world so that others, too, might know something of this Gospel. Our mission statement, printed at the bottom of our bulletin, says that we desire to “Know Christ”—that’s for sure—and then, to “Make Him Known” to others. The Gospel is never just for ourselves alone.

And about these hard cinnamon rolls? Maybe I should keep them around in case we’re short of a coffee fellowship host some Sunday. Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!” (ELW#246)
Advent wreath	“Light One Candle To Watch For Messiah” (ELW#240, Vs. 1-3)
After O.T. Reading	“The Lord Thy God In The Midst”
After Epistle	“Rejoice In The Lord Always” (as a round)
Message	“Come, Ye Disconsolate” (ELW#607)
During Communion	“No Matter What” (Stevenson <i>et al</i>)
YouTube videos	“Create In Me A Clean Heart”
Closing	“People, Look East!” (ELW#248)