

## “Joy from the Spirit”

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### **Intro.**

Last week’s Gospel reading was the beginning of Luke’s story of John the Baptizer appearing in the wilderness, preaching repentance — and this week we hear the rest of the story, the specifics of what John has in mind. His sermon is often understood as a blunt, bristling attack (“You brood of vipers!”), but on closer inspection, it’s actually a powerful message of inclusion, hope, and joy — which is why, after all, Luke calls it “good news” ([Luke 3:18](#)).

Let’s remember that while Advent is a time of longing and waiting in the shadows for Christ to come, there’s also room for some “anticipatory joy” in his arrival.

Can we have joy by getting stuff, can we experience joy by acquiring material gifts?

Is the joy that we want to have something that is produced by an external force? Can we have joy if we only have wealth? Or does the joy we all want come from above that we may experience it in our hearts?

Researchers have found almost no correlation between income levels and happiness. Between 1957 and 1990, income levels in the U.S. doubled. Yet during that same period, people’s level of happiness did not increase. In fact, reports of depression increased tenfold. Incidence of divorce, suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse also rose dramatically.

## **Bible context**

Author Mathew Myer reminds us that for John the Baptizer, “repentance” means a change of mind, heart, and life, and he begins his sermon by declaring that “bearing fruit” is what matters most.

In other words what John the Baptizer is saying here is that *Mere membership in a religious or ethnic lineage won't cut it*, he thunders; *what matters is what you do!* And so, the crowds respond, *OK, then what should we do?* John's answer is both straightforward and challenging: *Share your abundance with the vulnerable, and do whatever job you have with honesty, integrity, and respect.*

John's message is radically inclusive in at least two ways. First, he opens the category of “children of Abraham” — which is to say, heirs to the covenantal promise God gives to Abraham — to include anyone who leads a life of generosity, honesty, and respect.

John's disarmingly simple requirements (*Got two coats? Give one away!*) are by no means easy to follow, but they are strikingly accessible to all. And second, John underscores this openness by including members of professions that were understandably suspect. Tax collectors and soldiers both worked for the empire, keeping order for the Roman occupiers, and so were viewed by many as enemies or traitors to the Jewish community. The fact that John includes them here is a powerful,

even startling statement — and one of the first indications that Luke’s vision of salvation is universal in scope. For Luke, all means *all*.

### **Takeaways from the SALT lectionary Commentary**

Luke calls John’s preaching “good news,” a cause for joy ([Luke 3:18](#)).

Why? First, John’s challenge itself is dignifying, since it presumes that we have the capacity to rise and meet it, to become the even more generous, honest, respectful people God created us to be.

Second, because John’s challenge is open to all, not just a privileged few, he declares the divine covenant open to all in an astonishing, inspiring way.

And third, because John’s prophetic poetry includes the promise that the Spirit comes, in wind and fire, not to destroy but to refine, to restore, to make us more radiant children of God.

Will we have to let go of our anxieties, our self-absorption, our apathy, our sin? Yes, and those will be burned away in God’s unquenchable fire. But the chaff is removed for the sake of the wheat! Jesus comes that we might be saved and restored — and this is indeed “good news of great joy for all people” ([Luke 2:10](#))!

Because this week’s traditional Advent theme is “Joy” and because this reading from Luke is so joyful, this may be the perfect week to name and explore the role of joy-in-the-midst-of-sorrow in our lives and experience the Joy that comes from God. Amen!