

## SERMON – 2ND ADVENT

**MATTHEW 3:1-12**

**DECEMBER 8, 2019**

### ""CHECKPOINT JOHN"

Our readings are preselected to support a theme or season of the church year – they come from something called a “lectionary” and don't always complement each other. But rarely do they contradict one another! In Romans 15:13, Paul says *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”*. Sounds like a nice Christmas card greeting.

Then in Matthew we get John the Baptist. Somehow *“You brood of vipers – who warned you to flee the coming wrath”* seems out of place under *“holiday greetings from our household to yours.”* Paul spoke of unity as a gift of God – John says God has a winnowing fork in his hand to divide wheat from chaff. Paul says “rejoice, rejoice”, John says “repent...repent.” Paul says *“accept one another then as Christ accepted you”* while to Pharisees and Sadducees John all but says “get lost!”. Rejoice means be deeply glad. Repent means be deeply sorry. Rejoice means you have arrived at your destination – repent means you’re not even on the right road. And it means change, turning away from things you are doing that may become your “un-doing”.

Paul wants us to be full of joy about the coming of the Lord, releasing all the worries of life to God. John wants us to live expectantly, usefully, and compassionately because of the coming of the Lord in judgment. Paul speaks of peace, a fruit of the Spirit - John speaks of our need to *“produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”* Its’ as though these two lessons were designed to give us the “good cop, bad cop” treatment - don't worry about your life but don't get complacent about how you live either.

One of the characteristics of Christianity is tension. Being a Christian shouldn't make you tense. But I've been told that an admirable quality in a pastor is the ability to bring a “non-anxious” presence to their congregations. Truth is, Christians ought to be anxious, or at least restless about things like homelessness, a culture of death that seeps into our society in seemingly innocuous ways, the sense that whoever shouts the loudest or lines up the most boycotts wins the debate, not to mention the reported incidence of people who genuinely say they are “anxious” about their life is rising – the greatest increases being found among in people in their 20's.

Yet, Christians also ought to be supremely confident that their lives, as Paul elsewhere says, are *“hidden with Christ in God”* even as John's message portrays our lives as in the intense light of God's judgement. But while contrasts in these lessons are evident, contradictions are not. Both describe Christian life. John speaks of a “gathering in” while Paul of Christ's “acceptance” of us.

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Both are concerned the Advent theme of waiting – actively, in how to live "in the meantime" until the gathering and accepting occur. Both say being a Christian means to live with conviction.

The conviction Paul speaks of invites us inward, to our souls, where peace either does or does not reside. The conviction of John turns us outward, toward our neighbors – to the visible signs "or fruits" of a Christian life. John tells we must approach Jesus and "repent". Paul says we'll proceed from such an encounter with Jesus rejoicing. John knew the message of Jesus was greater than his. Paul articulated that message by saying "*in Christ we are a new creation, the old has passed, the new has come*", and "*there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Paul the one time Pharisee, in case you didn't remember said this.

Paul learned you must hear the message of John the Baptist to know how freeing that of Jesus the Forgiver is. Christianity is a paradox. How, you ask, can it have two such drastically different messengers of the same God as Paul and John? John knew what we all need to know – we can't rejoice with baggage in our souls. Paul knew what we all need to know as well - rejoicing is giving and being able to continually give the bags to Christ.

Many of you may recall that during the height of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall was the most prominent symbol of tension between Eastern and Western Bloc nations. There was a gate in that wall, which was called "Checkpoint Charlie". It was the only way to pass from East to West Berlin. On one side freedom and on the other fear. To experience the rejoicing and freedom from fear that is so much a part of the Christmas message we have to pass "Checkpoint John". We must be prepared for the Lord's response to some of the most difficult questions a person could ask; "*Lord, what must we do*". "*Lord, how must we change*"?

Christians sit between the demands of John in the desert that we "turn around" and make changes in what we do with this life that is on loan to us from God, and the delight of Paul, who tells us what's on the other side of such a conversion. Both caution we're not called to create our own way but follow Christ, who is the way. Christian faith does indeed create tension. Both Paul and John remind us the only way past tension is through it. But through it we go with a Savior who loves and leads "tense and tired ones" to a peace beyond understanding. AMEN