

SING OUT FOR JOY!
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What are the rules of faith? The rules most of us grew up with a variation of this:

God wants to be with only a very few special people,
and God is just itching to punish the rest of us with terrifying vengeance.

So straighten up and fly right. Threats and punishment!

I grew up with that. Many of you did, too. Not just churches do it. Huge systems, like government, use it.

So do family homes. Many faith traditions – not just Christian - all over the planet,
use threats and punishment to control the masses, to control the people who aren't in control.

For 10,000 years, all over the world, the system of threats and punishment
has been the go-to method to keep people in line.

We all understand it. We've all experienced it and so we learned the lesson well.

Even if we hated it, we used it: threats and punishment are just the way we get things done,
from raising our kids and managing our employees to dealing with criminals.

No surprise that John the Baptist had that mindset when he was promising the coming of the Messiah.

He was looking for a mighty warrior, a descendent of the great King David,
who would vanquish the Romans in battle and ascend to the throne of a restored Israel,
and who would make EVERYONE obey all the laws found in the Torah. He'd kick some butt.

There would be winners, and there would be losers, so you'd better back the right horse.

This is a message we all understand; it's a message we are still reading
in today's headlines all over the world: Hong Kong, the Middle East, here.

So, which one of ALL the groups that makes threats and dishes out punishment is doing God's will?

According to Jesus, not a single one of them. Threats and punishment are not how Emmanuel,
God with us, God with skin on, makes the Kingdom come near.

When Jesus said that no one who ever born is greater than John the Baptist,

he was affirming the part of John's message that people should change their lives and bear good fruit;
Jesus praised John's willingness to be a social outcast, to go to prison, even to die,
for the sake of preparing the way for the Messiah. THAT, says Jesus, is a real prophet.

However, John's approach to getting people to change was that old, old technique
of fiery threats of retributive punishment; which is not the nature of God or God's Kingdom.

We enter the Kingdom of God through invitation, through putting aside our own choices

and making choices on how we live, what we think, how we choose to be,
using the Kingdom's promises that all people, even the ones we don't like,
are to be brought into hope, love, joy and peace – ALL people.

People who live in the Kingdom trust the power of these promises,

and those who hear and trust this invitation, says Jesus, who lay down their arms,
who don't use oppression and violence to get things done, are even greater than John the Baptist.

Now, there is a subtle but important difference punishment and consequences.

Jesus is very clear about consequences. He doesn't say there are no consequences;
if we choose evil, we'll get evil. There's no surprise there.

But that's not God's will for us. God's will for us is for love, hope, joy and peace.

In using punishment, one person tries to control another to get what they want;

Consequences are natural, logical consequences for whatever we choose.

We remain personally responsible for the choices for we make.

God's invitation is for us to choose wisely, choose the Kingdom's values.

Jesus does not threaten, he describes. He leaves the power of choice with us.

God does not confer the hope, joy, love and peace of the Kingdom like a medal.

No, it's from the inside, when we accept the invitation.

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God transforms us, gives us the power to choose and to live the values of the Kingdom – right in the midst of brokenness, like Jesus did – and we can partner with God to heal our little corner of life on this planet.

What's the consequence of partnering with God to heal our little corner of the planet?

It is joy, divine joy – the name of today's Advent Candle, and the theme of Mary's song, Canticle 15, the Magnificat.

To give you an idea of how important that Canticle is to people, South American dictators prohibited the Roman Catholic churches from using of the Canticle in the Evening Prayer service;

the words were considered to be dangerously revolutionary. The tyrants got it!

Mary sings as she accepts God's invitation to partner with God

to transform creation, to turn the world, not through the tyranny of kings, but through justice for all, no matter how small or weak.

Through her son, Emmanuel, God with us, God with skin on, the blind see, crippled walk, the deaf hear, the dead live, just like God and the prophets promised to the ancestors of Israel.

We tend to think of joy as something we have when we get everything we want.

Kind of like a 6 year old on Christmas morning.

Maybe, but for real joy, heavenly joy, the joy that Christmas is about, joy to the world – all of the world, not just the parts we approve of – we need another dimension to the word.

The joy of heaven is when we are truly, genuinely glad when SOMEONE ELSE receives the promises of heaven – healing, freedom, security, love, peace – even if we also need them but haven't yet received them.

To be able to feel, live that, to choose to rejoice in the goodness another receives, is to be very, very close to the heart of God.

Remember, the night before he died, Jesus asked for the cup to pass him.

Jesus pled with his Father in heaven to live; this prayer was not granted.

Jesus wanted life, but he willingly gave his life up so we would receive eternal life.

Even though we had tortured and executed him, we are given the gift of eternal life.

He showed us all that death is NOT the ultimate power, life is;

that hate is NOT the strongest force in the world, love is;

that threats don't transform the world, healing does.

The joy of heaven, the joy given to the world at Christmas,

was to give us this way to truly live in the Kingdom –

in the midst of chaos, brokenness, ugliness, despair, and darkness.

The joy of heaven is to invite us to join Mary and Jesus in living and giving

so that others have what they need, and to be joyful in that.

You may think that what I'm talking about is impossible, but it's not.

People actually do it all the time.

The first step to living this way is to stop focusing on what's wrong in the world, and look for ways to transform it, to heal it.

To find joy in the midst of heartbreak, what should we do?

We Ac-Cent-Tch-ate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative, and Latch on to the Affirmative.

A true story about a woman who did that. Most of you have heard of Sandra Day O'Connor,

the first female justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, appointed by President Reagan in 1981. ¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandra_Day_O'Connor#Early_career_and_marriage

Justice O'Connor was a brilliant lawyer and jurist, a careful thinker, and, I might add, an Episcopalian. After her distinguished career, she retired in 2006 to care for her husband, John, who was suffering from Alzheimer's.

They had been married over 50 years, having met in law school in the 1950s.

One of their sons, Scott O'Connor, described their relationship as a true partnership: "They were husband and wife, lovers, best friends."²

The cruel disease, however, robbed them of that partnership.

John no longer usually recognized his wife or his sons.

He became uncontrollable at home, so he had to go into memory care.

Shortly after he got there, he became depressed and introverted, deteriorating rapidly physically and mentally.

Then, a most surprising turn of events: John fell in love.

He and Kay, another resident in the memory care facility, became a couple.

According to John's son, his father was like a "teenager in love."

When Sandra Day O'Connor went to visit John now,

he would sit happily with Kay, holding her hand,

smiling as he told his *wife* what he and his girlfriend had done:

walk in the garden, sit on the porch swing, eat dinner together.

Scott said it wasn't torrid; it was sweet and childlike.

So, what was Justice O'Connor's reaction to her husband falling in love with another woman?

Like I said, this woman knows how to find joy:

she accentuated the positive and latched on to the affirmative,

saying that she was "thrilled" that her husband was happy.

He was now outgoing, and so much healthier physically and mentally.

Did she want what he had? Of course she did! She missed him terribly.

But she was truly glad that John had found the love we all need.

This story is heartbreaking, to be sure; it may seem impossible. I don't know if I could do it.

But there are dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions of other examples

of people who know how to find joy when others get what they need.

Some of them are right here, and some of them are Episcopalians, too!

Such as medical workers who use their vacation time to go to impoverished villages,

like Mama Lisa and her students. You can help her accentuate the positive

by getting some of the handmade items from the village she loves in Kenya.

Those like Maureen Belote and others at Episcopal Relief & Development

who serve the last, the least, the lost and the lonely all over the planet.

You can help them eliminate the negative by supporting the 1,000 days of Love initiative,

and letting little children have a chance to grow up healthy and full of potential.

There are everyday Episcopalians like Bill and Kunkle and our own Ron Ellis,

who go to desperately poor places in the Caribbean to build schools, hospitals and clinics.

sweating in the hot sun so that schoolchildren will have a place to learn in peace and safety.

We can help them latch on to the affirmative by getting some of their soap.

If we can be glad people we have never met will get things we all want, we're beginning to understand joy.

There is no threat here; there is no punishment. There is, instead, always and only invitation

to choose the Kingdom of God; to trust our very lives to Emmanuel,

the God who is with us always, even in the darkness.

So, no, John the Baptist, there is no need for us to look FOR another.

What we ALL should do is look OUT for each other.

Wouldn't THAT make the angels sing out for joy again!?

² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1576716/Judge-lost-husband-to-Alzheimers-and-love.html>

ISAIAH 35:1–10

The desert and the dry land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. They will burst into bloom, and rejoice with joy and singing. They will receive the glory of Lebanon, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the Lord's glory, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and support the unsteady knees. Say to those who are panicking: "Be strong! Don't fear! Here's your God, coming with vengeance; with divine retribution God will come to save you."

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be cleared. Then the lame will leap like the deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing. Waters will spring up in the desert, and streams in the wilderness. The burning sand will become a pool, and the thirsty ground, fountains of water. The jackals' habitat, a pasture; grass will become reeds and rushes. A highway will be there. It will be called The Holy Way. The unclean won't travel on it, but it will be for those walking on that way. Even fools won't get lost on it; no lion will be there, and no predator will go up on it. None of these will be there; only the redeemed will walk on it. The Lord's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads. Happiness and joy will overwhelm them; grief and groaning will flee away.

CANTICLE 15

☐ My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

☑ **From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.**

☐ He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

☑ **He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit.**

☐ He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

☑ **He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.**

☐ He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

☑ **The promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever.**

JAMES 5:7–10

Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth. You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door!

Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness.

MATTHEW 11:2–11

Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Jesus responded, "Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me."

When John's disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.

"I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

SERMON HYMN: *Awake! Awake! And Greet the New Morn*

BLESSING:

The Lord calls us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Day of the Lord by focusing our lives on the promises of hope, the labors of love, the depths of joy, and the strengths of peace; go from here with the blessing of the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, this day and forever.