**Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle A**

**OSP – 2022**

There is little doubt

That tabloid news – both in print and online –

Revels in tales of the crash-and-burn, such as the recent:

stories of the sudden implosion of a cryptocurrency exchange

and the descent of its CEO’s into financial hell;

the debacle of high-flying rap artist Kayne West

abandoned by Gap, JP Morgan Chase, Adidas

and a stampede of others, or

the erasure of British royals named Andrew

since Mum is no longer around to protect him.

The English word for taking pleasure from the misfortune of others

is the impossibly arcane epi**ca**ricacy …

but most often we use the German *Schadenfreude* –

literally “joy from harm.”

Many languages have an equivalent:

in Hebrew it roughly translates

“There is no joy like malicious joy,”

and in Japanese

“The misfortunate of others taste like honey![[1]](#endnote-1)“

It is a very common human [and only human] phenomenon, documented among workers when they hear

that the cutthroat colleague didn’t get the promotion

or among jilted lovers when they learn that the ex

who dumped them is now having relationship problems.

One study found that children as young as two years old

Showed signs of *Schadenfreude*[[2]](#endnote-2)

when an unfair situations involving their peers,

is finally rectified.

Some argue that *Schadenfreude* served the evolutionary purpose

of biologically enshrining our aversion to inequity[[3]](#endnote-3)

as well as a useful strategy for bolstering our self-work.

I’m not sure such evolutionary explanations, however,

give us an adequate picture of why Matthew

in the gospel tales from last week and this week

provide us a brief but graphic picture

of the striking decline in fortunes of one John the Baptist.

This once high-flying prophet

who so dramatically roared out of the wilderness

with a fearlessness that attracted droves of followers

even as he chastised and called them to repentance,

who even appears to have counted cousin Jesus as a disciple

sensationally baptizing him in the Jordan

and anointing him as God’s own lamb,

is now not only in prison, but

staring down an all-but-certain death penalty.

He also seems possessed of an uncharacteristic self-doubt:  
 did he baptize the right messiah?

did he anoint the right lamb?

did he embrace the right cousin?

did he too easily fall into the “speak to power” trap.

In a phrase: was his life, his prophetic ministry for naught?

While I am coming to understand that the accumulation of years

can trigger such reflections

I believe there is more than advancing age goading us to wonder

if we have made the right key decisions in our lives.

It happens at so many of life junctures,

often in moments of self-doubt, when we wonder:

did I choose the right education path, school, major?

was this career track really suited to my needs?

should I have … did I … love another

and where would that have taken me?

does this church, this religion, this God

serve me on this life journey?

Such soul searching sometimes leads to that ultimate question:

has my life been a waste?

It is a question so pervasive, so enduring

that every year in this season tens of millions journey into

Frank Capra’s retelling of this soul-searching dilemma

as George Bailey contemplates ending it all

in the Christmas classic, “It’s a wonderful life.”

A more recent version appears in Matt Haig’s rapturous novel

*The Midnight Library*

A tale of Nora who has lost so much

that living has become too much of a chore …

and then, teetering between life and death,

she unexpectedly journeys into a magical library

where every one of the thousands of books on the shelves

is an alternate life ahead of her …

the dilemma is which one to choose

or whether life is worth choosing at all.

The Baptist we know as John

did not craft a Capraesque movie

nor pen a novel exploring his dark night of the soul

But he apparently took another route

pursued by so many others before and after him:

he dispatched a missive from prison.

Letters from prison are a recognized literary genre

even a part of the New Testament canon

as St. Paul is documented writing from there.

Such epistles are often a source of great wisdom.

Other famous examples are those penned by

the Lutheran Pastor and Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Arrested and eventually executed for his part in a plot

To assassinate Adolph Hitler.

Then there is the celebrated 1963 Letter

from the Birmingham Jail by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

offering his rationale for why it was a moral responsibility

to break unjust laws and take action.

More recently the letters of Nelson Mandela

who spent 27 years in prison, much on Robben Island,

for his anti-apartheid struggle

were published in celebration of his 100th birthday.

These and others like them

offer a unique glimpse into the soul

providing a kind of justification for one’s existence

and testimony that their actions, their arrests, their lives

were not for naught.

While we do not have a fulsome letter from John,

Only a few lines – actually only one furtive sentence –

that one potent sentence

sparks my imagination, as I wonder

what a complete epistle from him might have sounded like.

I envision him writing something like

*“it is dark and quiet here but I am not alone*

*… that same spirit that I wrestled with in the desert*

*That same spirit that filled the air*

*when I first started preaching repentance*

*That same spirit that hovered over the Jordan*

*The day I baptized him*

*That spirit is here … brooding, and prodding,*

*and wanting to wrestle with me still.*

*In this wrestling, I am grateful*

*that you took my questions to Jesus,*

*difficult as that may have been,*

*risking to appear like so many Pharisees*

*setting a public trap for my cousin.*

*But he understood it was not a trick*

*but a trauma … a dark questioning of the soul*

*that prompted such a question.*

*I really did wonder if he was the one:*

*the messiah who would liberate us*

*and overthrow the Roman army*

*who would engineer the demise*

*of puffed up, overfed clerical leaders*

*and their religion tuned only toward self-preservation;*

*or whether he’d simply turn out to be one of them.*

*His answers about the blind, the deaf, the lame and the poor*

*frankly shocked me.*

*That is not what I baptized him for:*

*where is the holy revolt,*

*his taking on the pompous elite,*

*winning over the masses,*

*steamrolling the priests and politicians,*

*and reestablishing the house of David,*

*the throne of Solomon?*

*I am deeply disappointed; but ultimately only in myself,*

*for in the midst of preaching repentance*

*I gave into the temptation of wanting my own messiah*

*who would speak and act the way I hoped*

*the way I had dreamed.*

*But cousin Jesus appears to be filled with God’s spirit*

*Not mine.*

*And so he has not toppled the mighty*

*He has not silenced clerical pomp*

*He has not ended greed and abuse*

*or the trampling of the poor*

*But he has exposed it.*

*That means I might be seeing him here soon*

*Maybe in a cell next to mine*

*Awaiting his own execution*

*The price of such deeply authentic ministry.*

*Is he the true messiah?*

*I suspect that he is*

*But we will only know, my friend,*

*If the spirit of his good news*

*Burns in the hearts of his followers,*

*And they take up his mission:*

*In times of doubt to raise up hope*

*In times of darkness to radiate light*

*In times of greed to manifest generosity*

*And in times of hatred and rejection, to respond in love.*

*Until we meet again … be at peace*

*And, no matter in what prison you might dwell,*

*No matter what darkness threatens to enfold you,*

*take up his good news*

*choose to be part of the proof*

*that I did truly baptize God’s own messiah*

*an unending source of consolation and light*

*and his name Jesus.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

**Piano**

Though an epistle imagined, this gospel daydreaming

Yet, I believe, brings us into the center of a Baptist’s heart:

A heart confined but not silenced;

A heart assaulted but not despairing;

A heart wounded but deeply graced;

We, like John, might not always experience

The messiah we hope for, dream of, even demand

But he is the one the world profoundly desires

And desperately needs:

This boundary breaking

Peace proposing

Humanity embracing teacher

Who invites us

No matter what darkness enfolds us

Or oppression threatens us

To take up his good news

To be extensions of his own incarnation

And prove to a doubting world

That John did baptize the true messiah

Emmanuel – God with us

whom we call Christ the Lord,

and the Church says: Amen.

**Music**: *Each winter as the year grows older,*  Marty Haugen arrangement

**Image:**

Text

Description automatically generated[**https://ellettsvillecc.com/sermon\_series/letters-from-prison**](https://ellettsvillecc.com/sermon_series/letters-from-prison)

1. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/11/141126094055.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/11/141126094055.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0100233> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I can no longer find the original source or inspiration for this fictional letter; if anyone knows, please contact me so that I can rectify this ascription. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)