

## Joy is the Infallible Sign of God's Presence

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

St. Mark's & St. James UCC ~ December 13, 2020

Rev. Dr. Patrick Schultz

Thieves can be and often times are the bane of our existence. It's one thing to lose something that belongs to us, it's a completely different feeling to know someone has intentionally *taken* something from us. That's just what a thief does – he steals what doesn't belong to him. He hasn't earned it; hasn't worked for it; he doesn't deserve it. It's not his!

Thieving is such a sin against humanity and God that God made it a point to make sure people knew how wrong it is.

Of the 10 commandments, number 8 tells us “*Thou Shalt Not Steal*” That's pretty straight forward isn't. Don't take what isn't yours!

And it's easy to think of thievery in terms of:

He took my bike. She took my money.

They robbed my house. Yet that's not all a thief takes from us.

When someone robs us we are left with a deep-seated trauma that affects so many parts of our life.

Identity theft leaves us feeling angry, even betrayed. And if the thief is never caught, then the victim has no where to go with that anger. No one to direct it to – except the act itself.

There is a very real sense of violation of privacy and a breach of trust.

You go to bed one night with the feeling that your money, social security number, health insurance, and personal passwords are all secure; you wake up to find that *everything* is at risk.

That sense of trust and privacy have been broken. Sometimes that brokenness leaks over into your relationships with family or friends or co-workers...

You question everyone's integrity and wonder... could it have been you?

You want to trust – like you did before, but there is this struggle to return to normalcy... confidence... esteem.

Instead of crying out:

Bring back my bike!

Return my car!

I want my mother's and grandmother's jewelry back!

Give me my money-I worked hard for it!

We're crying out: you stole a part of my life! Give me my dignity and my trust back.

And this crime wave doesn't stop until someone captures the thief. In the meantime, countless people have been hurt. The thief I'm thinking about today is not a man or a woman.

This outlaw is an 'it'. It's Covid-19.

Covid-19 is a thief! It has robbed us of our sense of normalcy. I don't know how many times I've heard the phrase – "*this is the new norm.*" You know what? I don't want the *new* norm. I want my old norm back!

And sometimes it's not that the new norm is something really, really bad. It's just that I didn't have the choice to opt for the new norm. The new norm isn't of my planning and my desire. It's been thrust upon me. And I selfishly think, it should be my choice – not someone else's!

It reminds me of the old saying, "People don't mind change. People mind being told they *have to* change." Isn't that the way it is? Change can be good. Change is necessary for continued growth.

This thief has robbed us of many things. The freedom to go where we want, when we want, and how we want. It has stolen jobs – leaving unemployment at new heights. It has drained us of our savings. And outright stolen lives. The lives of our loved ones. It has even stolen people's dignity in the way Covid causes death.

It has left us, in many cases, not sure who to trust: Scientists? Medical experts? Government leaders? News media? Churches?

Even the churches don't agree on what should be allowed and not allowed. Should the doors be open; should the people be meeting in the church building. Should they be able to sing or not; or take communion as they've always done it. People are upset that they can't and they call it issues of freedom.

And I've heard some churches talk more about the importance of freedom and the Constitution than the Bible. I've heard both people and churches selfishly talk more about how freedom matters and less about the sacrificial nature of what Jesus wants in our lives.

And they wonder why the church building is being treated different than Wal-Mart or the grocery store where people still need to buy what they actually need.

And they say that the church is essential. And I totally agree that church is essential. But it's not the church building that's essential. The church is not the building. It is the people.

Right now is the moment we need to stop looking out for our own selfish ideas of what church is and try to make sure we're doing church in a way that supports those who might get sick.

When Isaiah talks about bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom to the captives; and Paul talks about rejoicing and praying and giving thanks; and John talks about sharing what we have with those who don't...

They aren't talking about doing this for the sake of the temple or the glory of the church building.

They're talking about living out our lives like Christ calls us to.

And we do these things because we love Jesus.

And Jesus loved us first!

All of us; Jews and Gentiles alike.

Not just those who show up Sunday morning in the sanctuary.

Over the last couple of months I've talked with at least 16 members of our churches who have been tested positive with Covid-19.

They've been isolated; unable to work; hospitalized; intubated, left weak – with difficulty breathing and vulnerable and scared.

Sometimes we need to change ~ whether it's thrust upon us or it's someone else telling us ~ you have to.

Paul tells the church in Thessalonica: "May the God of peace sanctify you" But before that Paul tells the people:

rejoice (always)

pray (constantly)

be thankful (at all times – good or bad)

don't dismiss the Spirit

don't ignore the prophets

hold on to the good and throw out every form of evil...

We need to change! The whole Bible tells us so through biblical stories, poetry, song, by example and by command of Jesus Christ.

When John was baptizing people in the Jordan River, he told people to first ~ repent!

You don't have a free pass because you're a descendent of Abraham. And when the people ask John what they should do he says:

If you have two coats – share one with another.

If you have food – share with someone who doesn't.

Don't take more than you are supposed to.

Don't steal money. Don't steal people's dignity.

Repent of your ways. Change what you are doing. Not *only* for yourself! But for the sake of those around you. And John then baptized the people who came to him.

The thief named Covid has taken millions of people world-wide. And in doing so has changed the lives of 10s of millions more who have lost their loved ones.

It has ushered in a wave of fear; it has turned the education of our children into a dance with computers, screen time, and apps. It's made fun of how we do birthdays and anniversaries when friends and family used to get together. It's challenged our visits with the elderly who remain isolated in their assisted living homes.

It's changed the way we sing and pray together.

But when I think of the phrases I've heard from time to time:

“I do not live in fear, I believe God will take care of me.”

“Jesus has my back – I know he has yours too.”

I can't help but to think I don't fear. There's no fear.

With trust in Jesus we *will* keep our hope and experience true joy.

Wait a minute, how can you say joy? Have you lost your mind?

No, I haven't. There is a difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is rooted in the ancient word 'hap' which means luck or good fortune. Luck and fortune swing on the pendulum of whim. It's transitory. Joy is abiding.

Happiness is a passing thing; it's dependent on the circumstances around us. And it can vanish with a phone call telling us we've lost a loved one to Covid.

We are reminded that “Joy is completely different from happiness. It's a deeper reality, reaching into our souls to that place at our spiritual core where decisions are made. Where God's holy Spirit dwells. That doesn't change no matter what external circumstances are.

While Advent is upon us, we're supposed to be preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It's time that we *recall* the love behind God's decision to take on our nature and to demonstrate how to live in response to that love.

John the Baptist said, there is only one Jesus Christ. He is coming. Thanks be to God! Let's get ready to greet him.