

## Sermon: Rejoice in the Lord Always

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 15, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A picture is worth a thousand words. So allow me to approach today's message with this picture, actually a fresco painted by the Italian Renaissance master Domenico Ghirlandaio, as appears in this week's bulletin cover, titled "Preaching of St. John the Baptist".

We see John standing on a rocky platform, raised above a circle of men, women, and children to whom he is preaching. From last week's Scriptural text of Luke 3:1-6, we are aware that John was preaching in the region around the Jordan river, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In the tradition of Isaiah the prophet, John's role was that of a messenger, a messenger of God who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord.

His opening line was right away no-holds-bar, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*" Now here is a prophet who took his job seriously. Too serious as some would say, and some would undoubtedly call him a killjoy, and would certainly think twice about inviting John to a party. For he is not afraid to speak truth, to powers or to ordinary folks.

He zeroed in on a prevalent sense of entitlement amongst the Israelites, thinking 'We have Abraham as our ancestor', we are the chosen, favoured ones of the Lord. But John begged to differ. He urged his fellow countrymen to bear fruits— fruits worthy of repentance— or otherwise God may raise up others, even from stones, to replace the so-called 'children of Abraham'.

Isn't he just a killjoy, his dooms-day message a real downer? But the people ate it up, they couldn't get enough of John, and his fire-and-brimstone preaching. They were coming from Jerusalem, Judea, and all the region around the Jordan, they were all going out to him and were baptized

by him in the river, confessing their sins. John the baptizer, however, did not bask in the glory of his personal popularity. For he knew he was only a messenger, preparing the way of the Lord.

We see in the picture of John, holding up a cross by his left hand, pointing to it with his right. It may be interpreted as a visual translation of the Baptist's proclamation to 'Behold the Lamb of God...' (John 1:29). The cross, then, symbolically represents not only the coming of Jesus, but also his eventual suffering, eventual death, resurrection and glorification.

The actual coming of Jesus is depicted as a solemn figure at the top left corner, placing him both behind and above John, as he approaches along a sloped, descending path towards the crowd below. The straight road, hewn into the rocky hillside, is a reminder of John's earlier message, which is drawn from the words of Isaiah 40:

*"Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up  
and every mountain and hill be made low...  
then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

For all of his fire-and-brimstone preaching, for all his fiery rhetoric of the coming judgement, John's counsels to ordinary folks are actually quite sensible, tame even. *"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do like wise."* To tax collectors he counselled, *"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."* And to soldiers, *"Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."*

Simple advise to ordinary folks—just be good to each others, and live ones' lives in daily righteousness. The Kingdom of Heaven is not too far, it is almost within your grasp! Note that I said 'almost', for living a righteous life is only part of the answer, not quite complete.

The genius of Ghirlandaio lies in his composition of both Jesus and John, in similar posture, similar attire, same bow head that is leaning

slightly to the left. The relative position places John as the forerunner to Jesus, with Jesus not only behind him, but also above him, indicating their relative hierarchy in the Kingdom of God. For as great of a man was John, the one coming behind is greater.

For John readily admits, *“I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Repent, confess your sins, change your way and believe in Jesus. That is the message of John.

For those of us who have already believed, I shall leave with you the message of Paul the Apostle, in our Scripture reading today from Philippians 4,

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**