

Sermon: Light Two Candles  
Text: Luke 1:39-45  
Date: December 17, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
Third Sunday of Advent  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,  
the child in my womb leaped for joy.*

Luke 1:44

As I'm sure you know by now, our purple hymnals are filled with a whole new generation of wonderful, highly sing-able new hymns, including a heavenly host of new Advent and Christmas carols.

We just sang one of those carols, and we'll sing another one, following this sermon. But there is another one which we won't sing, but that is relevant to our purposes today.

It's called *Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah*. The verses unfold like Advent itself. The first verse talks about lighting one candle; verse two, about lighting two candles, and so on, until all four Advent candles are lit.

Thanks to last week's snow storm, we made the decision to light two candles today. In keeping with that two-candle approach, I want to briefly revisit what I was planning to preach last Sunday, the peace Sunday, as an entry point to this Sunday, the Joy Sunday.

Our text for last week was taken from the opening eight verses of the Gospel of Mark. After announcing the beginning of the good news -- that is, the gospel -- of Jesus Christ, Mark first takes a quick look back, into the past.

He briefly reiterates the passage from Isaiah that we read and sang together a moment ago. Then, having laid that foundation, he introduces the first human character in his story.

But it is not the baby Jesus, nor is it his famous mother. It is John the Baptist, the one who came to fulfill Isaiah's vision and prepare the way of the Lord.

After so many years, after so many Advents, so many face-to-face encounters with John, it feels like we know him well. His weird, caveman clothing, his bizarre diet of crunchy bugs laced with honey, his fierce and challenging call to repentance.

But is that really an accurate picture of this man?

A number of years ago Barbara Brown Taylor changed how I saw and heard John-- an experience which I shared from this pulpit.

Why would people stream out of the cities and into the wilderness just to be yelled at, she asked. No one likes to be shamed. Something else must be going on out in the desert to explain this phenomenon, to account for the popularity of John's message.

It's a persuasive argument. But just looking at the text itself, it's almost impossible to read the words of this intense preacher and not hear them as strident, to not feel the anger in them.

Which may, in fact, be why God sent him. Perhaps it's John's very anger that makes him the ideal messenger to prepare the way for the Advent, the arrival, of the Prince of Peace.

I stand among that school of preachers and activists who believe peace has a kind of inherent power. But this belief is not a matter of religious faith, of believing something that cannot be seen. It has been empirically proven, again and again.

Historical figures, historical giants, like Jesus and Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King and Bishop Tutu, all harnessed the power of peace and non-violence, and used it to push back, successfully, against powerful regimes highly prone to armed repression, including here in the American South during the Civil Rights era.

But there is an earlier question in play here. Where does this power come from? Where does peace itself get its power?

Kailash Satyarthi is one of the most qualified people in the world to address that question.

In 2014, Mr. Satyarthi won the Nobel Peace Prize. He was awarded this honor in recognition of his career as a child advocate, specifically for his work in freeing some 83,000 kids from bondage in child slavery rackets.<sup>1</sup>

Which is surprising because you would never have guessed that's what he would do with his life. He was no Mahatma Gandhi.

Kailash Satyarthi was born into a high caste family in India. Which is to say he was born into a social stratum that lived their entire lives above the fray, above the dirt and grime of street level, above the dirt and grime of India's untouchable castes, the castes in which most of the children taken into slavery were born.

Gandhi, by contrast, was born into a much lower caste than Kailash Satyarthi. So while Kailash had very little in common with the Mahatma, it turns out he may have had quite a lot in common with John the Baptist.

Because the thing that changed him, the force that turned Kailash Satyarthi into a peacemaker, was anger.

Here's how he describes the experience:

*When I was 11, seeing some of my friends leaving the school because their parents could not afford textbooks made me angry. When I was 27, hearing the plight of a desperate slave father whose daughter was about to be sold to a brothel made me angry. At the age of 50, lying on the street, in a pool of blood, along with my own son, made me angry.*

Satyarthi rightly acknowledges that most of us are taught that anger is bad. Or maybe we're not taught that.

Maybe we've seen the disturbing power of anger for ourselves, on nights when your drunken father came home and in a blind rage visited violence on you or your siblings or your mom.

Or when your boss regularly and loudly shamed subordinates, including you, for mistakes she herself had made.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Satyarthi tells his whole story here: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/health/cdc-trump-banned-words.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/health/cdc-trump-banned-words.html?_r=0)

Like electricity, anger is powerful and potentially dangerous. But there is another side to it. The part that motivates people to leave a privileged high-caste life and enter the fray, to get down into the muck where the vulnerable people live.

Kailash Satyarthi had the audacity to eat a meal with a family of untouchables. These decent, innocent people happened to be his neighbors, but they might as well have been lepers.

So the gesture was a scandal. The powers that be in his village, and in his family, drove him out of his home. Out of his caste. Out of his own name. Kailash Satyarthi was actually born Kailash Sharma.

The experience -- the anger he felt -- changed him. But here's the key point. His anger wasn't rooted in his sense of outrage about what he had lost.

Rather it was rooted in his outrage that his fellow human beings could be treated so poorly. That so many millions of his fellow Indians lived on the very margins of existence through no fault of their own. Rather, they were trapped there simply by an accident of birth.

Maybe that's exactly what was going on for John the Baptist. And maybe not just for John, but also for the God who called him to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ.

Outrage that so many people in the world live on the margins, consigned by caste or birth to a life of misery, a life lived down in the muck, forever excluded from the luxuries reserved for the privileged elite -- denied such extravagant amenities like access to a doctor, a simple roof over their head and a bowl of rice and beans for their supper.

And so this same God sends a messenger to prepare the way for the arrival of the one sent to preach good news to the poor and to set the captives free. And maybe it's anger that energizes John to prepare the way for coming of the world's greatest peacemaker.

I would guess the two women in the story I read earlier know a little bit about anger.

As women in first century Palestine, they have spent their whole lives living in the shadow of men. Being ignored by men. Being silenced by men. Quite possibly being abused by men, physically or emotionally or otherwise.

Admittedly, I'm reading back from our time into theirs. Maybe they were used to the cultural mores of their time. Maybe they were okay with being treated like property, on a par with cattle.

But the thing is, they weren't cattle. Elizabeth and Mary were women. They were human beings. And they almost certainly felt the same anger women still feel today when they are ignored or mistreated or abused by men.

In fact I'm sure of it because of what's about to follow in the very next scene in this story.

But something else comes first, and that something is joy. John, the child in Elizabeth's womb, leaps for joy when Mary arrives, carrying his divine cousin in hers.

But can you imagine how Mary has been feeling?

You've been a marginalized peasant woman your whole life, silenced, underappreciated, your humanity not even recognized. You've effectively been invisible from the moment you were born until Gabriel arrives one night with a life-changing announcement, to which you give your assent. *Let it be with me, according to your word.*

And suddenly you have a voice.

Turns out we don't have to imagine how Mary felt about all this. She puts her feelings into a song the world knows as the Magnificat, which she now begins to sing. This soaring anthem is arguably the most powerful hymn in the Bible, perhaps the most powerful hymn ever sung.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

Joy may characterize Mary's feelings about her situation, but when it comes to the rich and powerful and privileged elite of her day, well, that's a different story entirely. *Your time is coming, boys. The rich, God will send empty away, just you wait and see.*

It's not hard to imagine that even today, 21 centuries later, millions of women across this country are beginning to share Mary's feelings.

Anger at being treated like playthings and property for men to use as they please -- that part they've always felt -- and now joy that they are finally finding their voice, finally being heard and seen and respected, as they share their stories, as tell their truth, and as they watch an all-star cast of rich and powerful and privileged men being sent empty away.

But it's not just women who are angry these days. There is a heavenly host of things to be angry about in America right now.

And there are a host of things to celebrate and be joyful about, too.

I'm not going to name these things here. Because the things that make me angry and give me joy may be different than they are for you.

So here's what we're going to do instead. I'm going to give each of us a chance to channel our inner John the Baptist and give voice to our anger.

I invite you now to take the little strips of paper you've been given. White is the color of peace, so we're going to start with that one. I'd like for you to write a word or two, or a sentence or two, about the things that are making you angry right now. (Might even be this sermon for that matter!)

If you're so inclined, you can flip the little strip and write how you're going to channel the energy of that anger into something better, into an effort to make peace.

But you don't have to do that. You can just write whatever it is that is making you angry, and then, for the balance of Advent, you can think about, and pray about, how you might transform that energy into something more productive than anger, something that makes you a better person, or the world a better place. Something that prepares the way for the coming of Christ into your world, and into the wider world.

When you're done doing that, I'd like for you to take the pink paper -- pink in keeping with the color of the Joy candle -- and I'll invite you to do the same thing: write a word or two, or a sentence or two, about whatever might be giving you joy.

Then we'll put both strips into the offering plates -- as a genuine offering to God. Then during Wassail we're going to staple those strips into interlocking rings, and make garlands of peace and joy.

And we'll put those garlands, those offerings, on our Christmas tree as signs of how we're joining with John the Baptist in preparing the way for the coming of the Christ...