Last Sunday I asked the question, “How would we prepare ourselves for a visit from Jesus. This Sunday let me ask you this, “If John the Baptist roamed the streets of The Dalles yelling to repent and be baptized, would we ask him to preach at our church? as we would Jesus?

To be honest, I would feel uncomfortable inviting John the Baptist to a Sunday service, but I would probably still do it. I imagine parish members might feel a bit uncomfortable also. So, the obvious question for us to answer is this, “Why would I or you feel uncomfortable with the idea of John the Baptist preaching from our pulpit? Perhaps, it’s the earthy stories we have heard about John the Baptist that have influenced our image of this man. Wearing a cloak of camel hair and eating locust doesn’t fit our lifestyle. John’s intense message was designed to challenge the current way of thinking about God.

Certain words or images come to mind from the Gospel of Mark and Matthew when thinking about John the Baptist preaching at St. Paul’s, images that describe a man who may be on the rugged edge of insanity. The question for me still remains, “Would I still ask John the Baptist to preach at St. Paul’s?” The answer is yes.

In today’s world I have no idea what John the Baptist would be wearing, but I have little doubt that he would stand out as the prophet he was foretold to become. Would John the Baptist regale us with what he just had for breakfast, possibly wild honey or a locust or both? You get the idea … John the Baptist was not only atypical to the Palestinian Jew in the first Century, his image and words still evoke a wild man that has no limits. Yet, while John the Baptist is shown to be a person who was not your average Jewish man, there is another side to John that may explain both his image and his behavior.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient documents found in caves just outside Jerusalem in the 1950s were also known by the name, “The Manual of Discipline, which was called the Rule of the Qumran community. Jewish men, who were dissatisfied with Jewish temple worship, aligned themselves with the Essene Community. They stayed in caves, prayed, and ate what they could find in the desert to feed themselves. Family members would also venture out to the caves to help feed men who had chosen to dedicate themselves to God. There is strong speculation that John the Baptist was an Essene, moving out into the desert at a very young age. John the Baptist would have been tutored by teachers studying “The Manual of Discipline.” Luke 1:80 says, “And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.”

This man, John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, knew from a very young age he would have a very different life than your typical Jewish boy. John was destined to become the prophet, the forerunner of Jesus, the PR person telling the world he lived in that knowing God would happen in a different way than through temple worship. And this new storyline would be told, in spite, of John’s father being a Jewish priest. God was creating something new, and this new creation would not only effect people in the 1st Century people, but the story of God would continue for future generations.

One of the telling marks of becoming a Qumran Essene was to separate oneself from the Jewish Temple and its sacrificial cult. For the Essenes, the Temple’s offering of animals was to be replaced by the ‘offerings of the lips, that is, prayers and works of the Law. Man must render himself to God as a pleasing sacrifice; he must bring his spirit and body, his mental and physical capacities, together with his material goods and property, into the community of God. In this community all these gifts will be cleansed of the pollution of selfish ambition through humble obedience to the commandments of God (Manual of Discipline 1:11-13).

The Qumran community, both in essence and practice, was intended to be a living sanctuary. They believed this living temple, consisting of faithful people, rendered a better service to God than the Jerusalem sanctuary made of stones. Can you begin to see why the message of John the Baptist was one of repentance and baptism. He believed with all his heart that Jesus had come into the world to give this very message to all people, that people no longer needed to rely upon the Jewish temple to be absolved of their sins or lifestyle. To gain spiritual wisdom, was to live a different kind of spiritual life.

There is no written proof that John the Baptist was an Essene, but his words and life mirror the fabric of their spirituality. John differed, though, in one main way from the Essenes, “he went out from the Qumran community and preached what he knew to be true.” The message John the Baptist shared of God was for all people, both Jew and Gentile alike, and this was totally outside the practice of being a Jew or a Jewish Essene. Both Jewish temple gatherings and Essene communities were private gatherings, to bring spiritual growth to a designated group of people.

So why I have I spent so much time gathering information about John the Baptist? Because our current faith in Jesus mirrors many of the same characteristics of John the Baptist’s practice of faith in God. We teach and practice that cleansing of the soul, mind, and body happens individually and corporately, and spending time in spiritual reflection will bring us joy. Repenting or changing how each of us live into God’s joy through adversity is the storyline of the Gospels. There is little doubt that John the Baptist experienced adversity. Living in the desert is difficult, and when he ventured out onto the Palestinian roadways his words threatened the status quo. Eventually, John’s passion for sharing about repentance and a coming deliverer got him killed. John, I suspect, knew his life would be short. He knew he had a job to do, and that job might end up killing. John lived his life with vitality, meeting joy in the end.

At the heart of Advent and Christmas is joy. Authentic joy is the secret we find in vitality. Joy creates profound energy for living, and is a feeling that stays with us, and co-exists with the wonderful parts of our lives, and the hard parts of life. We tap into this vital kind of joy in all sorts of ways. Perhaps, nature brings vitality to restoring you. Maybe music sends you into a joyful space that cannot be explained.

And, then there is the joy of service, of responsibility, of serving God with all your heart, mind, and soul. As Christians, we bring our vitality to our worship services, or when we serve on boards or committees. Jesus mentions many times throughout the Gospels how being a servant will bring us contentment and joy.

The pandemic has stopped much of our service to God, both in the church and outside the walls of the church. Perhaps, it is time to return to a practice of faith bearing our service, where we step up to help with the different responsibilities at St. Paul’s to restore our corporate community. A community, regardless of faith or ethnicity, is only as strong as its weakest member, we must begin to act like a community of believers again who serve with joyful hearts.

Perhaps, serving is helping with coffee hour. Maybe, it’s writing cards to people who need to be encouraged. The Back Pack program is starting up again, and needs people to help. Altar guild needs people to lend a hand. Is it time to start a social committee again, so we can begin to gather in creative ways? One person, like the priest or co senior wardens cannot make a community bubble with vitality alone. The vitality of joy must come from each one of us. If I cannot feel joyful, then that’s my problem, not yours. John the Baptist would tell me to change my ways and be renewed in my baptism to serve with energy and joyfulness.

You see, the vitality of joy is a shared experience … joy cannot be contained, it can only be shared. Joy is never meant to be a goal in life, it is a gift of knowing; a knowing couched in acceptance. We accept what life has to offer and call it good. As Paul in Philippians tells us, “Rejoice, let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not worry 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.”

Finding joy is at the heart of our Gospel. Joy was the passion that filled the heart and words of John the Baptist, in spite, of people ignoring him as he preached the need for people to change their ways. People heard stories about Jesus, how he healed, how he was different than other spiritual leaders. They came to be like Jesus. Can we, too, just come to Jesus to be healed, where we share the vitality of his joy with all people. Jesus had a way of knowing that shared joy was the foundation of living life. Find and share your joy with one another, then and only then, will you feel deep joy. Amen.