

SERMON

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Gustaf Wingren

John 3:22–36 · 1943

19 December 1943

Motala Church

Text: John 3:22–36

Hymns: 41:1–2; 44:1–4; 39:1; 32:1–3; 43:3

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

Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of joy,

come to comfort us.

Let the voice of hope, among the cares of life,

speak to our spirit,

and give us peace

when life's evening darkens.

Blessedness, Lord,

give us on high. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 131:3)

Let us speak today of joy, a Christian person's joy.

John the Baptist stands there and listens to Christ, and he rejoices greatly at his friend's voice, though he himself is on the way toward decline and obscurity. In two respects the Baptist is a pattern of the genuine and pure joy. He rejoices over Christ, the Savior, the Lamb of God, who has won the congregation, won the company of disciples, and who is to be the point toward

which the church's faith is directed. And he rejoices — this is something still greater — over a fellow human being's success, over Jesus, the man. Yet hardly anyone, at the beginning of Jesus' work — and the text deals with the beginning — believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. One saw in him only the son of a carpenter in Nazareth, a man like others, and besides a kinsman of John the Baptist. John, the elder of the two, is able, then, to rejoice over his younger kinsman's success, to rejoice that it goes well for another man, at about the same time as it ceases to go well for himself. So only true love does. It rejoices over the neighbor.

There are scholars who have given their powers to a careful study of the motley collection of forms of religion which crowded one another in the Near East in the centuries around the birth of Christ, and who explain: if one wants to name the new and peculiar thing that broke forth on earth with Christianity, one must at last stop before this — the joy. There wells up, in the little hard-pressed company in Jerusalem at the first Easter and Pentecost, a joy without measure, a certainty of the presence of the Risen One which conquers all rising doubt, an inner joy in the service, the song, and the breaking of bread, a kind of unearthly jubilation in the middle of the weary and collapsing ancient world — a joy which springs up out of the inmost part of faith and which cast a transfigured shimmer over these people's faces when they mounted the pyre or went in to the wild beasts or awaited the rain of stones. This mysterious joy exercised a strangely drawing power on those who saw and heard the first Christians, and it has done more for the spread of Christianity during these centuries than much preaching and much social organization have been able to do. This joy is the joy of faith. Its ground is quite simply faith in Christ, the certainty that he is risen and that no power on earth can take from Christ his eternal rule. On the contrary, every earthly ruler, every human being, shall die and through death take the step over into the world where Christ reigns and where he receives his friends into an indestructible and heavenly fellowship, while he, on the contrary, in an unshakable judgment, thrusts away from himself the one who during earthly life has not wanted to belong to him. Where this faith in the kingly rule of Christ is living, there dwells a strange joy. Whatever happens, hard or mild, we still go continually forward toward the light. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life," as it says in our text. He is lifted above every threatening danger, for the worst an enemy can do is to kill you, and death is the union with Christ.

This kingly rule of Christ meets us already here on earth, before death. The words of Christ sound in our immediate neighborhood, and the sacraments which he instituted during his earthly life stand open for us. The mighty power in the life of Christ nearly two thousand

years ago, this hidden and strong, crucified and risen life, the mighty power has reached you also, for you are baptized and you hear the word of Christ. Our text speaks at its beginning of how Jesus begins his work with baptism. Do you ever feel joy that you are baptized? Have you thought that it could have been so, that Christ had never lived, that the Sermon on the Mount was unspoken, that the cross was never raised and the grave in the garden never broken open? It could be so, that at this hour in Europe there was only pure heathenism, not a church bell calling to the service, not a hymn-tone with the joy of Advent in it, not a word about the kingdom which is not of this world. The whole message of the church is only a fruit of this wonder: "God the Father's Son from heaven's kingdom became here a guest in the earthly kingdom." He is the one who is the church's King and Lord. He is the bridegroom who has the bride — and the bride, that is the congregation. It is not the religious experiences of Christian people that make up the subject of joy itself in a sound congregation, but Christ himself. We rejoice to hear his voice when in Advent he comes to his church. The longer a Christian lives, the more he understands: "It is as it ought to be, that he, Christ, increases and that I decrease." He who comes from heaven is above all. But he who is of the earth, of him it holds that so long as he speaks of his own and of himself, he speaks "of the earth," the text says. He awakens no lasting joy. It belongs to the harder words in our text, this: "If anyone receives the witness of Christ, he thereby confirms that God is true." He gives God right. But he throws no religious determination over himself. He lets God, lets the word of Christ, stand there in the center. He does not spread himself out spiritually, but only mixes his voice into the great choir that praises the name of Christ. He himself decreases, but the Savior increases.

In this way the joy becomes pure and clear and firm. If I look at myself, I am sometimes glad and sometimes very sorrowful. For I am a human being, that is, changeable and wavering. But if I look at Christ, as he continually comes anew to his church, a steady joy lies ready for me, for "Christ is the same today and forever."

This is the joy of faith. Now we come to the joy of love.

Sometimes it can be so with the people who are active in a Christian way. One practices charity and does much good. And then, when one is as busy as can be with one's helping work, one quite unexpectedly hears that the neighbor, or the neighbor's child, has succeeded beyond expectation in something and won great success, which just then sets the successes of one's own family in the shade. And then it suddenly knots itself together in the breast. One must acknowledge with shame that one does not rejoice over one's neighbor's happiness.

What is called love is sometimes more a wish that I shall get to do good, and not a wish that the good shall come to the neighbor. That is: self-assertion sometimes clothes itself in the mantle of love. And then it always lacks one mark. Something is missing which belongs to true love. The joy is gone. Right and genuine goodness rejoices over people. The person of love feels a breath of joy in the heart when he hears that it goes well for another, and he has no need that it must promptly be through him that the good reaches the others. In love there is the same as in faith: "It is as it ought to be, that he — the other — increases and I decrease." Faith lets God and Christ increase — of that we spoke just now — and love lets the neighbor, the fellow human being, increase. A Christian person who lives in both faith and love stands in a way under a continual law of decrease. Christ increases and becomes significant. The neighbor increases and becomes significant. While one's own I becomes less and less interesting. He who stands outside the Christian life and hears such a description of it may think that such a life must become darker every day. But you who have tasted this life, you know that the joy dwells in this, the only lasting joy.

And when God and Christ increase for faith, and one's fellow human beings increase for love, this is one and the same spiritual reality. Through faith Christ goes into the human being's heart and gives him the will to serve his fellow human beings. The divine life takes the way through the person whose own I decreases, and then, when God through such a person of faith and love reaches other people on earth, he bestows his gifts through true Christians, and the joy spreads on strange and hidden ways. For this, to see that one is the object of a person's love and care, begets joy in the heart. Who has not made the following observation: a great success, honor and money, can come to me and yet leave my heart cold and shut. But before one single little personal kindness, a look or a word or an act, the heart softens and is filled with warm joy. Love has the joy within itself, and it possesses a strange power to waken faith in other people, to create new hope and new joy — and thereby also to create new love.

But here the simply true word in our preaching text holds: "A human being can take nothing unless it is given him from heaven." The men of science accomplish the incredible, but they have so far not been able to create out of dead things a single little plant or a single living creature. Already the outward, bodily life is a wonder. If it is not there, it cannot be manufactured. Still more this holds of the life of the spirit, that is, of faith and love on earth. It does not stand in human power to manufacture this life. That is, it does not stand in human power to take the joy to oneself. Then it becomes amusement instead. The joy must come from within and well up without compulsion.

Once a strong joy broke forth in this Europe of ours, and it had its spring in the Christian church. It was the work of Christ in a dying world. Does the joy dwell in our church today? If it dwelt there, we should draw people — in any case more than now — to us without having to ask them to come. There is so incredibly little joy in our world today, and people are driven to where they believe it is. Soon, in six days, the churches of Sweden will again be filled to the bursting point with people who, in the middle of their spiritual confusion, still know that they must hear the Christmas hymn and must listen to the word about the Prince of Peace, in order to feel that they have had a real holy day. Think if a few of them, a handful only, could hear the tone of joy so that they must return to the temple more often and more often. For us who have gathered here today, the essential question before Christmas becomes this: Are we ourselves filled with joy that Christ has come? If our heart without hesitation answers a believing yes to that question, then there shall also be another joy at the same time in our heart: the joy of love, the joy over our fellow human beings. For the joy of faith and the joy of love are a unity in the Christian person's heart.

In the epistle, the first word of God read today from the altar, the apostle exhorts us: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say: Rejoice." Amen.

Translator's notes. He gave this sermon no title. The file is named John 3:22–26. The manuscript heading says John 3:22–36, and the sermon uses the later verses, so the text is given as 22–36. The Christian person stays he. The hymn stanza is for sense, not meter.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·