

## What we keep, keeps us

- [Philippians 4:4-7](#)
- [Luke 3:7-18](#)

Jaki Shelton Green is the first African American and the third woman to be appointed as North Carolina's Poet Laureate. When Jaki offers writing workshops in prisons and jails one of her writing exercises starts with this statement, "What we keep, keeps us."

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In the gospel reading today, John the Baptizer delivers a fiery and somewhat scary message to those who crowd into the desert to hear him. We tend to hear this as a fire and brimstone "shape up or go to hell" message, but it may have been based more in the political situation of the day. John never says that the wrath to come is God's wrath – it is possible that he is seeing the unravelling of the tenuous relationship with the Romans which will later lead to the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

However his listeners heard it, they responded, "What can we do?" Again, we usually hear this as the eager response of converts but could it have been a resigned or apathetic "What can we do about it?"

If John were preaching today, we would probably hear him as one of the climate change prophets. "where are you going to go to get away from the coming disasters? Don't rely on technology to save you, you need to repent and change your behavior." What is our response? Do we shrug our shoulders and say, "What can we do?" or do we ask with open hearts, "What can I do?"

John doesn't give a one size fits all answer. He answers three groups of people – the general crowd, tax collectors and soldiers, probably Jews who had been conscripted into the Roman army. To the soldiers he says “do not bully anyone and be content with your wages,” to the tax-collectors, who were notorious for lining their own pockets, he says “do not collect more tax than is due and to the rest of the people he says, “Share your clothing and your food with those who have none.”

Why these different responses? Because what we keep, keeps us.

The things you are hanging on to are probably different from the ones that I am holding on to. We have different memories, resentments, angers, fears, anxieties. We have different stuff both physical and mental that we hang on to. But we all have things that get in our way.

What is it that you keep, that is keeping you?

When I first looked at the readings for this morning I felt there was a contradiction between the gospel reading and the New Testament reading. The gospel seemed to be a real downer in comparison with the lightness and joy of the passage from Philippians. I thought that there was a contrast between John's focus on ethics and Paul's on joy. But then I realized that John is telling his listeners to get joy. He is telling them to let go of what they are keeping that is getting in the way of the very joy that Paul is talking about.

And that's how they heard it, they didn't hear it as another naughty or nice list, no we read that “the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”

They were excited. They realized that he was addressing the very things that they were keeping which were keeping them, keeping them back from knowing the joy and peace of the Messiah.

The predominate theme in our readings today is joy. Today is Gaudete Sunday; Gaudete is Latin for Rejoice! Originally Advent was a forty day fast just like Lent, and Gaudete Sunday provided a day of relief from the penitential atmosphere. Today we remember that the coming of the Christ both in Bethlehem, in our lives and in the coming glorious reign of God is a coming of joy.

The Tuesday morning spiritual conversation group is talking about joy. We are basing our conversation on the Book of Joy which came from a meeting of Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama. As someone who naturally tends to depression, I was relieved to discover that joy can be learned. Whereas happiness can be pursued and happens, joy is a choice.

The two spiritual elders approach it a bit differently from each other – both are sure that joy comes from loving others and working for their well-being but the Dalai Lama finds joy through a deep meditation which enables him to separate his own sense of well-being and joy from his external circumstances, whereas Tutu finds joy in his relationship with Christ. It is more nuanced than this, but it seems that the Dalai Lama's path uses his mind, whereas the Archbishop's is more from the heart.

Both of them have found a way, despite tremendous suffering, to have nothing that they are keeping and which is keeping them. Except peace, love and joy. They are both able, in their different ways, to live Paul's instruction in 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 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. (Phil. 4:4-7)

This is something that they have come to as a result of long lives of prayer and meditation. Grief and hardship still happen but they do not hold onto them. Their lives are not defined by suffering and sorrow.

Perhaps this is the winnowing, that our lives, our hearts are winnowed by the Holy Spirit to keep that which is joyful, that which is of God and let go of the rest. The whole process of winnowing is to separate out the heavier and valuable grain from the unimportant chaff but sometimes I think I am running around God's threshing floor saying. "No, no not that bit of chaff, that husk, that's very important to me, I need it, oh and that piece too."

Those are the things I am keeping which are keeping me away from joy. Great big important things. Which in God's eyes are little pieces of chaff.

In her writing workshops, Jaki Shelton Green the Poet Laureate of North Carolina, encourages participants to write a letter to themselves about what they are keeping that is keeping them.

What is keeping you from joy this Gaudete Sunday?