### “Filled with Expectation” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 15, 2024

**Philippians 4:4–7**

4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**Luke 3:12–17**

12Even tax-collectors came to John to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 14Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” 15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary.”

Does the cold weather invigorate you, make your skin tingle and your mind sharpen? Maybe it’s a bit of a shock to the system, but it does force you to be wide awake. Well, let’s bring our alertness and attention to these Bible texts.

In the gospel we have a story of John the Baptizer. John was one of the true moral heroes of human history. He told people to get ready for the coming of the Promised One, to repent from their sins and to commit no more. I think he was a little confused as to the mission of the Promised One, however, thinking that he would primarily come to judge, to reward and punish with a winnowing fork, whereas Jesus showed that his main mission was to reveal God’s goodness and love, and to proclaim God’s truth. The Prodigal Son parable shows the father forgiving and loving rather than judging or sentencing. Many other parables emphasize doing good. Regarding his mission, Jesus says, in the Gospel of John, “For *this* I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (18:37). Elsewhere he says that he came in order that people might “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). So we see that Jesus came to impart love and goodness and life.

People had a wide range of hopes and expectations for the Messiah. Jesus knew he would not meet many of these expectations (the militaristic and nationalistic ones), that he would be able to *partially* meet some of their other expectations (healing and bringing justice), and that he would greatly exceed some of their others (again, some of the healings, but especially in the area of teaching and revealing truth).

He would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. “Fire” might refer to the enthusiasm and courage with which Jesus filled his followers. They became fiery evangelists and tender ministers to the poor, the hungry, and the outcast. John the Baptizer speaks with his usual intensity when he speaks of being baptized with fire.

But Isaiah had spoken with intensity, too, when he said “the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (Isa 35:6). He speaks of God’s perfect guidance: “A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray” (35:8). The saved shall be filled with joy: “everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (35:10). Maybe the fire to which John refers is an intense and infectious spiritual joy. Jesus did bring such joy to those who truly believed him, to James and John, to Martha and Mary, to a man born blind about whom his disciples wondered, whether he or his parents had sinned, Jesus answering “neither,” then healing him (John 9:2–3, 7). Jesus spoke of those who received the word with joy (Luke 8:13). Jesus taught the disciples about love so that “your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

A Christian named Olivia Davis wrote of how she forfeited joy: “I scrounged around in my emotional basement and thought that maybe if I got these problems in my life solved, I’d finally have a fighting chance at being happy. If I got a degree, had a steady career, got married, or crossed one more thing off my to-do list, I’d finally have the joy of the Lord. All I had to do was come before Jesus, empty-handed, discouraged, a mess, balancing a hard-hitting cocktail of family troubles, physical pain, and church hurt before an almighty God. And that’s all that we have to do. . . Knowing Jesus is better than any of the emotional highs our world offers.” (https:// lookingupward.org/2020/04/09/joy-in-the-lord/)

There is joy also in what Paul taught about how believers should live. In his final letter, he says “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). We see in the phrase “with thanksgiving” the joy that believers should have as we pray. Sometimes we need to pray with supplication, but we can still feel joy, knowing that God is admitting us into his heavenly family.

So that’s our assignment: not to worry but to raise everything to God in prayer and thanksgiving, to aspire for the peace of God, which transcends understanding, and to let God’s hand in your life bring you joy.