

By Deb Richardson-Moore

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Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3: 1-12

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, We continue this Advent season with joy and anticipation of your rule in this world. As we await the Christ, make us more Christ-like. In his name we pray, Amen.

### Our Measure

Back in 2007, an elderly parishioner named Louise Grant gave me a book: *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*.

I loved that book. I found out why Bing Crosby sang *White Christmas*. I learned how *I'll Be Home for Christmas* became a World War II anthem.

I preached from it so much that year that the congregation was ready to slap me and Louise both.

But the songs I was really interested in were the religious Christmas carols that we'll be singing in here this season, starting with *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*, in just a few minutes. It's a song that might have been created for Triune.

The song was written by a 14th-century monk named Heinrich Suso.

Suso was born to German royalty in the Middle Ages, a time when poverty and disease still covered most of the world. The great majority of people were poor, and there was a harsh line between them and the upper class.

Ironically, Suso was born to that upper class, and could have lived a life of luxury. Instead, he became a Dominican monk.

In those days before the printing press and before the Reformation, there were no printed Bibles. The church told members what to believe. But Suso felt that common men – and not just educated priests – deserved to read about the gospel.

And so he wrote – with quill and ink -- the *Little Book of Truth*. It was an attempt to tell the gospel in a way that would bring hope to the common people.

The Catholic Church didn't agree. It tried him for heresy.

But Suso didn't stop. Next he wrote the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, a practical book written in simple language for the common people.

Well, everyone knew that God was not available to common people. That's why they had priests! The medieval church feared the kind of radicalism Suso was suggesting, and the pope condemned the monk.

Eventually, the German king exiled him. Suso fled to Switzerland, an utter humiliation for one born to royalty.

Over the next few years, Suso was persecuted, slandered and threatened with death. Still he preached about the happiness he found in his relationship with God.

One night as he slept, the monk had a vivid dream in which he heard and saw scores of angels not only singing – but dancing. When he woke up, he remembered the dream, down to the words and music the angels sang. He dreamed in German, of course, but here's the English translation:

*Good Christian men, rejoice  
With heart, and soul, and voice;  
Give ye heed to what we say:  
News! News! Jesus Christ is born today!  
Ox and ass before Him bow,  
And He is in the manger now;  
Christ is born today!  
Christ is born today!*

Well, if Suso's little handwritten books caused trouble, this song was really over the top! He broke all three rules of 14<sup>th</sup>-century hymn-writing.

Christian music was supposed to be solemn, totally based on Scripture and never, ever written in the common language.

Not surprisingly, the church did not accept “Good Christian Men, Rejoice.”

The German people, however, loved the upbeat, joyful song about the good news of Jesus and how wondrous the elation of a believer could be. It was not published, but it became a song that believers loved to sing.

And it may have even inspired a young man named Martin Luther. Luther, of course, sparked a revolution with his radical beliefs that Christian learning was not the property of the priesthood but should be accessible to the people.

Finally, even the Catholic Church itself recognized its error. In 1831, 465 years after Suso’s death, the pope declared Heinrich Suso a saint.

Around the time of Suso’s canonization, a priest in the Church of England held many of the same beliefs. James Mason Neale was another free thinker who believed in an exuberant faith – which was not the model that the national Church of England was pushing.

Neale’s thinking – so like that of the exiled German monk -- got him exiled to a far-off pastorate. He was ridiculed by the Church of England’s leadership, and once, even beaten and stoned by a crowd.

Still, Neale believed the gospel was intended for the lost and forgotten, those whom society despised and dismissed. Over the objections of his superiors, he founded the Sisterhood of St. Margaret, an order of women to feed the poor, minister to prostitutes and care for orphans.

Goodness! He was taking Matthew 25 rather seriously, wasn't he!

Both Neale and the Sisters of St. Margaret received death threats. But they also reached tens of thousands of people who had been largely forgotten by the church.

In the midst of all this, Neale discovered Suso's song, *Good Christian Men, Rejoice*. It spoke the joy of the gospel for commoners, for the very people Neale cherished.

So he translated Suso's carol into English. And in 1853, despite Neale's reputation for disruption, an English publisher released it in a book called *Carols for Christmastide*. This book provided the means for the song to reach the rest of the world, and emerge as a favorite carol in both Europe and America.

*Good Christian men, rejoice*

*With heart and soul and voice*

*Now ye need not fear the grave*

*Jesus Christ was born to save!*

But if you ever go to Carnegie Hall or the great cathedrals at Christmas time, chances are you won't hear *Good Christian Men, Rejoice*, or as our hymnal has rephrased it *Good Christian **Friends**, Rejoice*. It's a song that has been largely overlooked by classical music performers.

The writer of the little book Louise gave me thinks that might please Heinrich Suso and James Mason Neale. Their song still belongs to "the least of these," to us commoners whom the composers found worthy of the suffering and ridicule they endured.

Many writers in the Bible make a great distinction between "the world" and believers. They are seen at odds. The measure of a human being in the world is often totally at odds with her measure in God's eyes.

But as the stories of these songwriters show us, even within the ranks of Christianity, the measure of human beings is often not the measure of God.

Today, we're going to look at the gospel of Matthew for an Advent story of a man who broke societal conventions. It's the first appearance in Matthew of John the Baptist.

Luke tells us that John the Baptist was born just months earlier than Jesus. But in Matthew's story, we have jumped ahead about 30 years, and John the Baptist is announcing the arrival of the adult Jesus.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Matthew 3: 1-12**.

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight." '

4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

I find this a remarkable story. For while John is announcing the coming of Jesus, he spends more time chastising those in power. He spends more time



explaining how the measure of men will no longer be the measure of God. If it ever was.

In the first few verses, Matthew links John to the prophecy of Isaiah -- John is the **“voice ... crying out in the wilderness”** whom the Old Testament prophet foretold.

Then Matthew carefully describes how John is dressed – in **“clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist.”** We’ve heard about these clothes before. They are the same clothes worn by the prophet Elijah. And Elijah, said the prophet Malachi, would return before the day of the Lord.

Matthew is carefully laying the groundwork so we know that John has been expected. John is the new Elijah who signals the coming of the Lord.

And for two verses, everything was good. Everyone in the region ran out to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

But John was sort of like Heinrich Suso and James Mason Neale. He wasn’t going to go along with the religious authorities of his day just because they were in power.

When the Pharisees and Sadducees came for baptism, John was having none of it. **“You brood of vipers!”** he shouted.

Now that is not what preachers usually say when people come to be baptized. We're a bit more gentle, even when we suspect one's motives or character. We tell ourselves that God knows someone's heart, not us.

But John has no such qualms. He challenges the religious authorities to show the fruits of their repentance through their actions. Just being Jews, he tells them, just being descendents of Abraham, means nothing. This new Messiah whom he is introducing will require so much more.

And then he even issues a threat in Jesus' name: **“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**

It should come as no surprise that John the Baptist did not fare well by the measure of human society. He never stopped saying what he thought. Especially when he spoke to power.

As you'll remember, John told the ruler Herod that he was wrong for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. She waited for her chance to get even.

It came when her daughter, Salome, danced at one of Herod's parties. She pleased her stepfather so much that he offered her anything she wanted. And Herodias had her ask for the head of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist died because he dared speak truth to human society.

Heinrich Suso suffered ex-communication, exile and slander because he dared speak up for the common man.

James Mason Neale suffered ridicule and death threats because he dared take literally Jesus' command to serve "the least of these."

The measure of a person by humans, sometimes even by Christians, is not the measure of a person by God.

In the United States, we don't have a national church. But we do have popular evangelists who make the same wrongheaded, blind statements that got Heinrich Suso exiled, that earned James Mason Neale death threats. Two weeks ago Franklin Graham said that opposition to the president was due to "demonic" powers.

I would argue that for many hurting and faithful Christians, opposition to the president is due to a true reading of Scripture. Trying to follow what Scripture says about how we speak about each other, how we treat each other.

But it doesn't really matter how I measure. It matters how God measures.

And nowhere do we see that more clearly than when God comes to earth as an infant -- to face measure by humans, who in all their wisdom, murdered him 33 years later.

As we make our way through this season of awaiting the arrival of that infant, let's take our own measure.

Do we follow the teachings of the man that infant grew up to be?

Those teachings were echoed in the lives of Heinrich Suso and James Mason Neale. And following them cost those men almost everything.

Do we worry about how the world measures us?

Do we worry how fellow Christians measure us?

Or do we focus solely on how God measures? For that's the only true measure there is.

Amen.