

Advent|Joy Again

Rev. Luke Whipple - Luke 1:46-55, Psalm 126 - December 13, 2020

Intro: We need to be reminded of Joy

It's my opinion that this third week of Advent is the most important one for us this year. As we light the candle of joy, I am reminded of how much we need joy in our lives in this moment.

I think that this need for joy is evident in what was happening in England over this past week. You might have heard in the news that they are starting to unroll a covid19 vaccine in the UK.



Many of the first vaccine recipients, elderly people and hospital workers, are feeling really emotional, even driven to tears, when receiving the vaccine shot. Now, imagine if this was the news a year ago. It would sound crazy! We would be asking, "Why are people crying as they get a vaccine?" (My kids cry at vaccine shots too - but that's because they don't like the needle prick. I cry as well, not when I get a shot but when I watch my kids get one.) These people, however, are experiencing an emotional release.

They are crying because it's been a long year, and a vaccination finally feels like a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

I think those tears are just a microcosm of something bigger. They show how much this year has exposed a deep ache in our hearts across the world, that we have not experienced on this scale in a long time. Not all of us are crying, though. Some are, right now, depressed because of loneliness. Some are angry - maybe angry at other people for their behavior or angry at political leadership. Some are exhausted. Some are grieving. However it manifests, a pandemic removes the cover and exposes the aching of our hearts. Life has been hard this year, there's no prosperity or diversions to hide behind, and we are all yearning for joy. A *real, authentic joy*.

So where does this wellspring come from? What gives joy to our hearts? The answer is to turn back to the words of that Bethlehem announcement. Just think back to the words of the angel to the shepherds at Jesus' birth. The angels said that they had good news of "**great joy**" for all the people (Luke 2:10). These angels were not tempering our expectations with their announcement. They promised that "great joy" is coming to the world because Jesus was arriving on the scene to save the world.

That phrase, "great joy" challenges my thinking right now. So often, in moments of profound heart-ache, like we are living through, it is easy to believe that pain and sorrow constitute the majority of our existence. In low times we tend to believe that life is mostly sad and joy is a brief, fleeting experience. To put it in a picture, joy is like witnessing a beautiful sunset. It is an incredible experience but in a few moments you are left in the dark. The darkness is despair and it is where you spend most of your life.



That can be the way life feels, but through Jesus things are different.

Joy is our future reality

Jesus flips the balance, so that joy becomes the core of who we are.

This week, I read a short essay by the author GK Chesterton. In the essay, Chesterton raises a really provocative idea. He says that the Christian faith believes that

Man is more himself, man is more human, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial....

If I were to rephrase this as a question I would ask,

What if sadness and sorrow end up being incredibly small experiences in comparison to the “great joy” that God has in store for us?

That is an amazing thought to have because, for most of us, our lives and personalities have been shaped by times of sadness and pain. You could likely point to the death of a loved one, the hurts you’ve experienced, the times you were neglected or forgotten, the times you were abused and chart a path of how those experiences in your past have some bearing on you and your personality today. But could you imagine that there will be some day when all of our pains and hurts will feel far less weighty? We will arrive at some day where we will say of our pasts, “that was a really hard experience, but it pales in comparison to this great joy we have now.”

That joy for desperate people is what I read in our psalm, today. Psalm 126 talks about joy through God’s rescue. The psalm describes Jews who were captives in war and had to live for decades in exile. Now, these people are finally able to return to their homeland. They can return because God has restored them.

PSALM 126
When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” 3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

The psalm begins: “**When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.**” It feels like a dream, for them, because being restored is an otherworldly experience. Being brought from despair to restoration is unique and special. It's a dream.

Then, the psalm says, out of that experience comes joy.

“Our mouths were filled with laughter,” we are told, “tongues are full of praise, and even the nations of the world are saying, ‘**God has done great things for them.**’” (psalm 126:2)

In short, I think the psalm is teaching us that we experience the most joy, otherworldly joy, the more we experience *God working in us*, helping us, restoring us. “**The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.**” (psalm 126:3)

Joy is a work of God, not a work of “mind over matter”. As the psalm suggests, true joy comes from God’s help. But for us, God works joy into our lives at two levels. I like to think of it as two doses of joy. The first helps now, and the second is the long-term solution.

Joy for the short-term: A gift of the Holy Spirit.



There is a joy that comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. The power of positive thinking is not the center of the Gospel story. The center of the gospel is a God who gives and often what God gives is himself. John 3:16 says God gave his Son, Jesus. John 14:16-17, Jesus says he is giving us the Spirit of truth (*the Holy Spirit*). Paul, then, teaches us that the Spirit, in turn, gives us all kinds of gifts and fruits. And Paul believed, taught, and experienced that immediate joy that comes from the presence and gift of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, you get a brief nod to the gift of joy from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians. These early believers were accepting the message of Jesus in the midst of persecution and hardship, yet Paul says that because of the Holy Spirit they were able to receive it with joy.

“...you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

The Holy Spirit, therefore, gives us joy in the short-term. Joy right now, despite the hardships we face in this life.

Joy for the long-term: Know that God will be triumphant in the end.

Joy, however, is not just God’s short-term solution for us. As we read from G.K. Chesterton, eventually joy is meant to be the ‘default disposition’ of God’s people. Joy will be the core of who we are. All of this will happen, because of God’s work of restoration.

In our second lesson today (Luke 1:42-55), we have Mary singing about the good news of her coming son. She recognizes that Jesus is the one who will bring about God’s restoration. Jesus will be the “joy of the nations” (Luke 2:30-31). Even her cousin Elizabeth says that Mary is so blessed, because “God will fulfill his promises to her.” (Luke 1:45). The bulk of our passage today is Mary singing a *joyful* song of God’s promises being fulfilled. Mary sings about how God will one day: lift up the lowly, overcome on behalf of the oppressed, humble the mighty, and feed the hungry. God has great plans of restoration for us in the future brought to us through Jesus Christ.

“Praise the almighty God he’s done great things for us.” (Luke 1:49)

Mary’s song is a joy, not just for the pregnancy she is experiencing now, but the promise of what God will do in the future.

The joy of that first Christmas was not just what had come, but what will be done through Jesus. I think it is expressed best in the words of William Burns:

“The joy of the future was part of the thrill of the first Christmas” (Robert W. Burns).

Joy: In the car for a long time



A few weeks ago, I drove our kids to an outdoor event in Chippewa twp. The local fire department was having a drive thru Christmas experience for kids. So I took our two oldest with me to the park where it took place. We drove through a few back roads and when we arrived we found ourselves in an incredibly long line of cars. I thought, maybe this line will move fairly fast, so we can wait.

Well, there was pain in the waiting.

We sat in this long conga-line of vehicles that inched slowly around a soccer field. I could see the end of the line where Santa Claus stood. But I could also see how slow the vehicles were inching forward.

The waiting became so painful. I saw cars pulling into the grass and peeling out of the park, choosing to leave rather than endure this monotony. And I kept thinking: “they are so smart.”

We soldiered on, however.

Over time, my kids were getting restless, making loud noises, starting to wrestle each other. “Oh, Lord why are you leading me through this misery” I thought.

Eventually, I started moving through the stages of grief. First came denial: *I can't believe I decided to do this.* Then followed anger: *Why are so many people in this line, all people ever want are freebies!* Finally, I was bargaining: *If I can get out of this line, I'll just take my kids to the dollar store- a prize there will be just as good as what they will get here.*

Eventually, our car made it around the circle (*after about 2 hours of waiting*). Surprisingly, my kids loved it. They thought the gifts were incredible. The cookies were delicious. Seeing Santa up-close was thrilling. It was worth it to them.

Why am I telling you this story? Because this is the picture of the Christian life.

We know there will be struggles. We know there will be times of grief and sadness and frustration. But we can see where the journey ultimately ends. That has all been clearly told to us: the journey ends with Jesus restoring all things and with that bringing joy to all his people. And whether you think, right now, that the reward promised is merely a trifle, (*like I believed when I was in line to see Santa*) you'll be surprised when you get there at how good it is.

As Elizabeth told Mary:

“What the Lord has promised will see fulfillment”

Praise the almighty God, he has done **[and will do]** great things for us

and that should give us joy!