

Community Church of Issaquah

December 11, 2022

Is Joy So Hard to Find?

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If honesty is the best policy, then it would be wise of me to be honest as we begin this message on the concept of “joy.” The truth is that this topic for the third Sunday of Advent is likely the most dreaded for ministers and church leaders. It might be hard to believe, but this one sermon is perhaps the most difficult to write for any minister. We often wish we could just copy something from some other message and be done with it, but that would not be fair or honest. So, we think, we pray, we contemplate, we write, we delete, we write again. . .and the process seems to take forever to complete.

The problem isn't that all of us at some time or other have experienced joy in our lives. We have. The birth of our own child, the birth of a grandchild, some event in our lives that made us giddy, or something that warmed our hearts to the point we could not find words to describe. More often than not, we would label this as “joy.” And it truly was. But when we examine the more than 100 times in the Scriptures when the word ‘joy’ appears, it isn't quite like what we have experienced. It's much deeper and has a very different meaning.

As a teen, I can remember singing this little chorus, “I've got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Down in my heart. Down in my heart.” Maybe that was just one of the

choruses of the day that was upbeat and more like the music from American Bandstand. Then when we would endure Sunday School classes, one message was repeated over and over. “Joy – that means Jesus, Others, You,” telling us the order in which we should direct our attention and preference. And then every Christmas one of the first hymns we would sing at church was “Joy to the World.”

That particular hymn was written in 1719 by an English minister and hymn writer named Isaac Watts. It was his attempt to redefine a portion of Psalm 98. The passage written is this: “He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn. Shout for joy before the Lord, the King.” In 1848, a man named Lowell Mason used parts of Handel’s Messiah as the tune we know and sing today.

This is a hymn that talks about the Biblical definition of ‘joy.’ At the center of its message is the coming of a Messiah, a gift from God that would bring great joy. The words of anticipation and wonder are beautiful – except for the words of the third verse that says “no more let sin and sorrow grow...far as the curse is found. Many hymnals delete that verse because it doesn’t speak about the joy David sang in his psalm. But there are so many other Christmas hymns that do talk about the joy of the season. Exactly like the hymn we just sang, “Joyful, joyful, we adore thee.” That Biblical message of ‘joy’ is such an

integral part of our Advent and Christmas season that we often pay little attention to its deeper meaning.

You and I might often experience extreme happiness and would call that 'joy' because it is. We could compare that sense of delight with some of the main characters in the Biblical Christmas story. Imagine the joy Elizabeth felt when the angel told her that even though she was well past the time of childbearing, she would give birth to a son whose name would be John. Or the joy mixed with anxiety that Mary felt when she was told she would be the mother of the son of God. Or the shepherds in the field who were told the good news about the birth of the Messiah and were the first to find the child and worship him. Their joy centered on one person, one fulfilled promise. It was the promise that the prophets had foretold centuries before it actually happened.

Throughout the New Testament, the core of the concept of joy is that only God can give it and it would only come from redemption or salvation – believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who would come again to save us. In Paul's writings to different groups of believers, he admonishes the Philippians to "rejoice, for indeed the Lord is near." Be happy in that promise. In the book of Romans, we are told that we cannot make ourselves experience joy but that it only comes from God. Can joy only be experienced when a Christian thinks about salvation, or eternal life, or about Jesus?

During this third Sunday of Advent when we light a candle for "Joy" it is because we want to anticipate all the

wonderful things to come with the birth of Jesus. It was this anticipation and realization that the shepherds experienced when they literally ran to Bethlehem to find the baby as the angel had foretold. In some church traditions, the candle for today is pink which was the color priests would wear as they waited with parents for the birth of a child. In anticipation, parents has painted the room pink and so this pink candle of joy is called the shepherd's candle.

As a father, I can tell you that I did indeed spend more than 20 hours waiting anxiously for my son to be delivered. And when the nurse brought him from the delivery room for me to see, my heart nearly jumped out of my body with joy. That might be one of, or the most joyful moments of my life. I believe that what you and I want to define as 'joy' are experiences like that. The question that comes to mind is this: "how do we translate something like that into this Advent Season when we already know that the baby Jesus was born?" How can we soak up the same enthusiasm that Mary and Joseph, or the shepherds, or the wise men had that eventful night?

The joy that was experienced that night was a direct gift from God for those there. God had given them a filling of joy that comes from God alone. You and I will surely experience more joy when we spend more time with God and are blessed by him with life happenings that do indeed fill us with overflowing happiness. Perhaps it's when we spend more time with God and open ourselves to his working in our lives that we get a better understanding of joy in our everyday lives. There is also an underlying

promise that once God gives us joy or joyful experiences, no one can take those from us.

I was exchanging messages with someone here – I would blab the name – about my struggle to write this message. As I told her, it was hard for me to talk about joy when I looked out my window and all I could see was that white mess called snow. I have never liked snow or ice nor extreme cold weather. I'm spoiled. In her wisdom, she related a story of someone she had talked to who found the snow to be thrilling – something well beyond my understanding. Kids making snowmen, undisciplined youth throwing snowballs, older adults sitting by a fire and thinking, "This is great. I don't have to go to church today." I suppose snow could bring some joy to folks, just not me.

So, what does bring us joy and why is it so hard to find at times? Through the days that lead up to the birth of Jesus, we look for ways to give and receive joy. Often in the form of happiness, it hints at what we can expect on Christmas morning. Getting real Christmas cards in the mail from friends or family, making special treats that are usually only a part of Christmas season (my pastor friend Beverly always sends me a large package of her caramel brittle that is so incredible), sorry, I get distracted. Maybe it's shopping for presents for those we love and trying to imagine how excited they will be to receive them. Maybe it's a gathering of loved ones that we don't see all the time and are thrilled to be with them. Maybe it's decorating your tree or your home with your own collection of "gosh, where did this come from?" ornaments. Or maybe it's

being in a church service where you can be with those who have a deep meaning in you life and you can sing and soak up the beauty that is all around you.

Whatever your source of joy is, keep in mind that joy is the gift that God gives us so that we understand what that gift means. Perhaps our joy doesn't really come from what we have here on this earth, but from our relationship to a loving God who made a promise and kept it. That source of joy is encompassed in our Lord, Jesus Christ who truly is a gift from God. And it was wrapped and laid in a manger in a barn. Surely not like the gifts we put under our trees that will be ripped to shreds as they are opened on Christmas morning.

Let me close this message about finding joy by sharing with you the words to the hymn we sang earlier, "How great our joy."

*While by the sheep we watched at night,
Glad tidings bro't an angel bright.
There shall be born, so he did say,
in Bethlehem a Child today.
There shall the Child lie in a stall,
This Child who shall redeem us all.
This Gift of God we'll cherish well,
That ever joy our hearts shall fill.*

May we all find some joy this Advent and Christmas season. And may it be plentiful!
And may it be so.