

“The Direction of Joy”

Isaiah 35:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

December 11, 2022

One of the best parts of growing up for me, as with just about any child, was Christmas. Back when I was a young child, we'd come to my grandmother's house which was in Lenoir, North Carolina. We'd have to drive there from Springfield Ohio, down the dreaded West Virginia turnpike (that's what my dad called it as he cursed quite a bit driving down it) and into the foothills of North Carolina. My grandmother's house was a magical place to me as a child. There was a large, unfinished basement that was filled with things for us to play with. My aunt had a dog, Lady, that would love on us when we got there. Not having pets at the time, spending time with Lady the Dog was a Christmas treat in and of itself. Best of all was the party that we'd have on Christmas Eve. Filled with relatives, cookies, cakes and candies, and loads and loads of presents. We'd gather around a silver tree...do you remember those garish things? And distribute what felt like an inexhaustible number of presents to be distributed. It was a joyful time, to be sure.

What do your Christmas memories look like? Are you able to scan back through the years to find those warm memories which fill us with joy whenever we recall them? Chances are that during the Christmas season, we will experience a measure of JOY. And, just like it's suggested in the Grinch that stole Christmas, it'll come despite all the troubles, worries and anxieties which normally weigh us down throughout the year.

I'll never forget experiencing a taste of Christmas joy on the drive home from a midnight service at River Hills Community Church. This warm, pleasant feeling just surrounded my whole body. I knew in that moment without a shadow of a doubt of my salvation. Knew that Jesus Christ had really atoned for my sin, really prepared a place for me in the Kingdom that comes. What was amazing about that experience of JOY was that it came at a most unhappy time. You see, it was the very first Christmas after my sister died suddenly and unexpectedly. We were all still deeply mourning the loss of my sister. In fact, the entire Advent season really had been spent in a depression as I went through the motions of being merry at Christmas but had almost no sense of God's love.

As I look back on the most joyful times of my life, I am reminded that they were all surrounded by some unpleasantness or some uncertainty which made the joy even more appreciated when it arrived. For example, my son Benjamin was brought into this world, bringing with him a whole new measure of joy on the day the market crashed in 2008. I remember going to the cafeteria after Ben was safely delivered and seeing that Wachovia stock was listed under \$1. That would've represented a big loss for us but, at the time, I literally could've cared less. The joy of the moment had me so elevated that I couldn't imagine anything but blue skies and sunshine coming in the days ahead. So, too, at Natalie and my wedding, things weren't perfect – the caterer did a bad job, the wedding director blew some things but still, JOY arrived in great abundance.

So why is that? Why were we able to experience such joy under such adverse situations?

Well, to begin with, it helps to remember that joy and happiness aren't the same thing. One of the very obvious differences between happiness and joy is that happiness tends to be dependent on external events, while joy is something achieved internally. For example, we can feel happy when we receive something like a gift or achieve something like awards or honors. These things are external or belong to the surface of our lives.

Joy, on the other hand, is something deeper. It is something we feel internally in our lives as human beings. It's the reason why we can hear these words of James and not lose our minds. **James 1:2-3** – *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”*

Now let me confess something. I sometimes find this scripture more baffling than any other but believe it to be true, nevertheless. Just last weekend, when I had an accident in my car that was ENTIRELY my fault, believe you me, my first reaction wasn't of JOY. But what James suggests to us connects us with why JOY and happiness aren't the same thing. Happiness is external. Joy is internal and is ultimately attached to our salvation in Jesus Christ. That's why James can so casually say to us, you know what, when you're tested, you ought to rejoice because James knows that joy is always a choice for us. We can always luxuriate in the joyful knowledge of our salvation.

Henri Nouwen writes – “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every

day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.” As a matter of fact, the first experience we really have of joy comes as we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Now, as Reformed Presbyterians, we recall that our salvation happened on the cross 2000 years ago. But whether it came in a confirmation class or at a church camp or sometime in our later adulthood, every one of us here had a moment in which we decided, that we were going to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior because we understood that He died for our sins. In that moment, we experienced a measure of JOY because our Joy is most immediately attached to our salvation.

David, as we all know, was a man whose heart was with God. Yet we also know that David was far from a perfect man. In fact, on one occasion, David did something so vile that it almost defies explanation. He fell in love with a married woman. To make matters much worse, he slept with this woman and then conspired to have her husband killed. Yet David was a man with a heart for God and he fell into a great gloom after his transgression. David became truly penitent and writes Psalm 51. There we read, *Psalm 51:12*, David writes – “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.*” You see, David understood that his joy was caught up in his salvation and that came directly from the Lord. Ours is as well.

Lost in the change of colors and societal tastes is the fact that Advent is supposed to be a season of penitence. Akin to a little Lent, it’s a season that’s designed for us to be spiritually self-reflective. To ponder our sins and to feel the weight of them on us as we desire to be free of them. The reason for this of course is that, on Christmas Day, we rejoice. For in Jesus’ birth, we hear the glorious first notes of God’s grand symphony of salvation. There, in a barn, Jesus came, God in the flesh, Emmanuel, God with us. And this Jesus Christ, He came for a reason. You see, from the beginning, we’d listened to the false voices of the world telling us not to obey our God. We’d been deceived and despite God’s many attempts to reign us in, we remained in rebellion. But then, instead of destroying us, out of His sublime love, God did something even more amazing. Through the Son, Jesus Christ, God became one of us. He did so because none but man should pay the debt of our sin and none but God could afford to pay it. Thus, Jesus, as both God and Man fully each, was able to return us to the state of salvation.

This awareness can always take us to joy, no matter what our external circumstances. It’s the real reason why stock market crashes and other various and sundry downers can’t ever rob us of our joy entirely because we can always come back into that place where we experience it because Jesus is always available to us.

Sometime over the Christmas season, give this a try. Schedule some time for reflection. Then, when it’s time, go to a room with a comfy chair. Bring your Bible. Read Psalm 23 then, just close your eyes. Imagine all that you’ve just been told. That you’re loved and cared for. Yea, that even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you will fear no evil. That there’s a God that is providing for you richly. Then, remember Jesus Christ and all He’s done for you. Ask yourself, do you believe in HIM?

Because the answer is yes, there, at the end of that, will be a measure of joy. An unshakeable confidence in your salvation. That’s why joy is accessible to us, even when we’re not terribly happy.

You know, you might find it strange to believe, but you can encounter a lot of joy at funerals. There’s just something about family being gathered together, with the Lord in the center that makes for joy, even as sorrow remains. While happiness and sorrow may not be compatible, thankfully, joy and sorrow are.

Henri Nouwen once wrote, ““No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.” Now, if you’re like me, you might wonder why God has made joy so accessible to us. But joy isn’t a one-dimensional feeling, its far deeper than that. Joy has the ability to change our thoughts, move our hands and feet and find us doing the unimaginable – proclaiming Our Savior Jesus Christ.

Now look, it only makes sense that good things lead us to share them. Have you ever been to Morgan’s Ice Cream over in Stanley? It’s a little out of the way for us here but it’s probably only a 15-minute drive from here. They serve something over there that you simply must try. It’s called Pecan Praline Pound Cake. I know, what’s a cake doing at an ice cream shop but there it is. It is the most wonderful pound cake you’ve ever eaten. In some ways, it’s like they took a pecan pie and through some wondrous kitchen alchemy, transformed it into a pound cake. It really is that good. Do you want a piece yet? Of course, you do unless you’re allergic to nuts

or just don't like things that taste good, you grinch.

In all seriousness, there's a great picture of this in the Scriptures using verses that are dear to the season. I read from the Gospel of Luke, the second chapter, verses 8 through 12 – *“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’”*

“Notice the news about Jesus' birth is not only news, it is good news! And it is not only good news, it is good news of joy! And it is not only good news of joy, it is good news of great joy! And it is not only good news of great joy, it is good news of great joy for all the people! But how will all the people know about this good news of great joy unless we share it with them?” – Ray Fowler

Yes, those shepherds in the field that night were treated to celestial fireworks show over the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ into the world. The announcement led them to take some specific behaviors. Let's listen to the rest of the story to figure out what they did. **Luke 2:15-20** – *“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’”* ¹⁶ *And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.* ¹⁷ *And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.* ¹⁸ *And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.* ¹⁹ *But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.* ²⁰ *And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”*

Well, the first thing the shepherds did was confirm what the angels told them. They went to Bethlehem to see this child that the angels spoke of. Can you imagine the sight? To go back in time and to have seen what those shepherds saw? Well, the great good news of joy reminds us this morning that Jesus Christ is just as present with us today as He was to those shepherds through the power of the Holy Spirit. Although He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, Jesus tells us that He will always be with us. **Matthew 28:20b** – *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* **Revelation 3:20** – *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me”*

One of the things I do from time to time at Christmas is go back and watch “A Christmas Carol.” As we all know, it's the story of Scrooge, an uncharitable older man who goes out of his way to make life miserable for the people around him. Of course, as we know, Scrooge is visited by three ghosts, each of which shows him a vision of his life. Thankfully, the ghost's visions do their work and Scrooge is transformed. So joyful to find himself alive come Christmas morning, he's a changed man. Do you remember one of the first things he does? He buys a pheasant for the Cratchit family and delivers it to them.

Yes, JOY leads directly to proclamation. It also leads us to have a heart filled with praise. What is praise of God? Praise of God occurs when our senses are filled with the divine nature and we can't help but exalt our God. We see this happen in the Bible to Mary following an excited announcement of Jesus' birth from Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. Do you remember, when the two come together, both pregnant and John literally leaps for joy in the womb being in such close proximity to Jesus, also in the womb. She exclaims, *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant, for behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation.”*

Having a heart of praise inspired by joy does some wonderful things for us. It can provide us energy in difficult times. It can keep us centered in tumultuous times. Having a heart of praise given to us by the JOY of the Lord will allow us to navigate our days with a measure of grace and love.

Yes, this Christmas, make a choice for JOY. Remember, Joy can come despite your circumstances because it is attached to an ever-present Jesus who, the Scriptures tell us, is within us, around us and always FOR us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.