

“Joy”

Isaiah 12; Romans 12:9-18, 14:17;
Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 2:9-10, 13:44

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As we move further into the season of God coming into the world, I believe some of the banners in the sanctuary are moving around us as well. We will sing a number of carols that we often know, one of which is “Joy to the World.” It’s a wonderful song and idea—who doesn’t want joy to come into the world? I was wondering about that because sometimes it feels like we don’t have enough joy, so why do we struggle with that? We sing that song about joy coming into the world and yet there are some ways in which I find myself struggling in this season.

I was listening to music last night, and I heard the tune, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.” As I was listening to it, I was thinking that midwinter had a really good marketer. Branding it the most wonderful time of the year doesn’t quite fit for me. And as I was listening to it and feeling like it was telling me I was supposed to think this is the most wonderful time of the year, I was still struggling. It felt like the song was telling me to erase my tears about the things going on in the world. For example, there are migrants on the border in cages, and children separated from parents. We have such divisions within our country and people are full of fear and hate, so much so that we have shootings. There’s just so much! In the midst of all these woes of the world (and I could go on, though I don’t think I need to), it felt like this song was telling me I was somehow supposed to make this the most wonderful time of the year in the midst of my own tears, and it wasn’t working.

So, I am thankful for somebody like Paul, who can sit in jail—a much different situation than mine. I certainly have a lot more reason to be happy or joyful than Paul did in the midst of his situations where he was writing letters, and yet he is able to bring up joy. As I was trying to work on this sermon about joy, I wished that Paul had just done an essay on joy so I could go there and see exactly what he was talking about. But instead, I picked out pieces of scripture that talked about joy because there’s not one place where there’s an essay on joy that I can go to and give to you from Paul or Jesus. And yet, there is this undergirding sense that Paul believes that even in the direst of his circumstances, he has something he can call joy.

What is joy anyway? We had a good discussion in Sunday School this morning about whether joy and happiness are the same thing. Oftentimes I think we think of happiness as a little lighter, more ephemeral. I wonder if joy isn’t something that we feel drawn into, that is, an experience that goes beyond what I can bring to life. Somehow it is God entering into our lives. Somehow, we are encountering the wonder of who God is, the grace that God has given us. The idea that we find out in the midst of all our struggles, in wondering about whether I’m worthwhile or not, and recognizing my own sin and problems, that God loves me. God loves us, and breaks through that barrier and brings love to us incarnate in Jesus Christ. God invites us to know that we are loved in a way that invites us into life, into joy.

It is there that Paul can write and talk about the kingdom of God as going beyond the joys of eating and drinking, the joys of our general life, and recognizing that it is when we see God or feel God or feel drawn into the place God is inviting us—the kingdom of God, a place of righteousness and peace and joy. I think we could add some other terms there, like hope, grace. Righteousness, peace, and joy are the characteristics that, in the middle of telling the Romans not to worry so much about judging one another, he gives as insight into the nearness of God and God's way.

Isaiah talks about it in terms of being able to draw the waters of joy from the well of salvation. Our joy is drawn out of the well of salvation. That's a little different in my mind than thinking that I have to somehow dredge up joy, change my attitude, change my very being in a way that it just doesn't feel like I can do, and be happy. But I can think about, I can remember, I can wonder at the idea that God might love me. God loves us. God comes in love to show us the grace that wants to lead us into life. Now that's water, something I can drink in, that does bring me to rejoicing. But it's beyond me and it is in that that I thank God.

As I remember that it is beyond me, I think about these wise men as they came and how they weren't even there yet. They just saw that the star had stopped, and their joy welled up because they had the hope, the realization that they were going to be able to encounter this new king.

Sometimes joy comes through remembering the wells of salvation. Other times it is through the hope that God has given me, a hope that he will not disappoint. A hope that God is present, that God is leading us to life or at least giving us the opportunity to go into the fullness of life and life everlasting, there's a moment where I can find hope, and in that hope know joy. In fact, in one of these verses, Paul says, "Rejoice in your hope." He's saying let hope be a wellspring for your joy. We may not be able to see it in everything around us, but in the promise, in the grace, in the presence, in the opportunity that God gives us we have hope and that's a joy.

Out of that, we are invited to recognize, as Jesus says in that parable, that the kingdom is among us, present, that we might discover it and, in that discovery, find that I go beyond myself. I'm drawn into life that is about living with everyone, living with each other and caring for each other. It's the way Paul can then talk about, as he lives out the joy of the kingdom, that he wants to be happy with those who are happy and weep with those who weep. We receive joy from beyond us and are, in our joy, drawn to go beyond ourselves in spreading this joy.

We hear these kinds of verses: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice. Shout with joy." We hear the angels announce this news of great joy. I hear it as an invitation. I hear it as an invitation to remember three things. First, to look again with wonder at what God has done. It's looking back, being reminded that God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son that we might have life everlasting. So, it's looking back and recognizing that God has been at work and is still at work.

Second, it's an opening of my heart. It's an opening of my heart to realize that God is not going to overpower us and make us happy, make us joyful, make us be any particular way, but he will invite us. As we open our hearts and allow God's love into our lives we will find, I think, that he will displace the idol of power with the joy of mutual love. This is the joy of hope in God's presence and expanding kingdom.

Finally, it is a wonder at God's gift. It is a looking back. It is an opening of my heart to what God has done. And it is a receiving of the gifts of God: the hope, the grace, the possibility that God gives us. Then, receiving the gifts leads to giving the gift and experiencing the joy of giving. It is then that I begin to find a joy that rises up, a joy that comes from the waters of salvation, a joy that is a grace realized, a gift we receive that we might share it and into which we can live. Amen.