

“Glad Tidings of Great Joy”  
Luke 1:5-17; 1:39-45; 2:1-15  
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If there was one word that underscored what the birth of Jesus meant to the world, it was the word “joy.” If you were to connect the dots between our three New Testament readings, that is one theme that predominates. In the FIRST, the angel of the Lord encounters Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, just as he is about to offer incense during worship in the Great Temple. The angel informs him that his prayer for a son has been heard by God and that his wife will soon bear him a son whom they are to name John. Then he says that this child will be a JOY AND DELIGHT to them and many will REJOICE because of his birth. Their joy at this announcement had to have been OVERWHELMING since Elizabeth was barren, and in that culture, the inability to bear children was regarded as the WORST misfortune to afflict ANY woman.

The SECOND reading takes place some months later when during Elizabeth’s pregnancy, her cousin Mary arrives to help her with the baby’s delivery. Upon entering the home, Mary greets her whereupon the child in her womb makes a sudden jerk. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to ME? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb LEAPED FOR JOY!” Here, Elizabeth marvels at being TWICE blessed by God, FIRST by now being able to have a child in the FIRST place, and AGAIN by having her cousin Mary ASSIST her during her pregnancy- Mary, who will soon be pregnant HERSELF and become the mother to the Messiah, Israel’s long-awaited Deliverer. This scene confirms for Mary the promise she had received earlier when the angel Gabriel appeared and announced to her that she, from among all the women in Israel, had been chosen to serve as the mother of God’s son. And so the great joy in this scene is TWO-FOLD.

The THIRD lesson concerns the appearance by the angel to a group of poor shepherds while tending their flocks by night. Startled by this sudden sight, the angel tells them not to be afraid for he comes with a message of GREAT JOY which will be for all the people. That very evening, he who shall be called Christ the Lord—Israel’s savior--was at last coming into the world. But he would not be arriving as a conquering hero typically would, that is, seated upon a great white steed with a mighty army arrayed behind him. However, rather than in a display of power and authority, he would come in just the OPPOSITE- he would arrive in lowliness and meekness, as a little babe wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Where any soldier or Jewish academic would laugh at such an outlandish suggestion, only persons of humble birth possessing a child-like faith such as these shepherds would ever believe such implausible news! And their faith in the word of this angel is proven when they leave their flocks and head straight into Bethlehem to see this wondrous event that had been told them. Thus, the story of the birth of Christ is filled with joy and wonder from beginning to end and that becomes the greatest of news- not just for ISRAEL, but for THE ENTIRE WORLD to hear!

But then I want to shift directly to the FOURTH Gospel, because there John helps us to understand just how central “joy” must be to the Christian Church. In the first fourteen chapters, he only uses the term once, but then when you get to chapter 15 and the beginning of Jesus’s Farewell Discourse, where Christ is giving his disciples some final words of instruction in the hours just prior to his arrest and crucifixion, he speaks of joy some SIX TIMES. You can’t help but wonder how during such a heartrending moment as THAT, when his whole world is about to come crashing down upon him, Jesus could possibly THINK about “joy,” how such a notion could even enter into the ken of his own mind, and yet, that’s precisely where he was focused.

This is because the POWER of joy--of TRUE joy, of CHRIST’S OWN joy--is INFINITELY stronger than any power that fear or despair can hold over someone’s mind or spirit. He tells his followers that he has spoken to them of these things that their “joy may be full.”(Jn.15:11) A short time later, he says, “Up to now, you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”(16:24) And then he tells them, “But now I am coming to you; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.”(17:13) In John’s first Epistle to the early Church, he says that the purpose of his letter is that “our joy may be complete”(1:4), and in his second Epistle, he tells the church, “Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”(1:12). Throughout John’s gospel and letters, it is found repeatedly- this theme of the fullness or completeness of Christ’s joy in us.

When St. Paul names the fruit of the Spirit in his Epistle to the Galatians, the first fruit he mentions is “love” which is then followed by “joy” in his list. The Westminster Catechism teaches us that our chief end is to “glorify God and ENJOY him forever.” Our worship services often open with the declaration, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us REJOICE and be glad in it.” Hence, joy is not just one small part of the Christian life- it is CENTRAL to it and serves as its ends as well. In fact, we were CREATED for it. Yet divine joy should not to be confused with feelings of pleasure or some kind an ecstatic experience or emotional high. Nor should it confused with what we ordinarily call “happiness,” for happiness is a state of mind that is dependent upon circumstances or people or success. We’ve all seen how the bluebird of happiness can land on our shoulder at one moment and then disappear the very next.

The joy that CHRIST speaks of is something entirely different. It is a condition of the SOUL- the result of living in harmonious communion with God. Such joy is impossible to manufacture for it represents the FULLNESS or COMPLETENESS of God’s love in our lives; it is the consequence of abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in US. When we live in intimate communion with him, when we “walk with him and we talk with him and he tells us that we are his own” as the old hymn says, we experience a TRUE joy. Regardless of what happens to us or around us, we have a profound sense of being loved, forgiven and cherished by One who is far greater than us or whatever the situation is that troubles us, and that in turn engenders within US a sense of love and humility and gratitude and security which Christ calls the “fullness of joy.”

Yet, this joy is far from some kind of shallow exuberance. He wasn’t talking about the kind of rah-rah feeling described in the kid’s song, “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my

heart.” Rather, his is a HIGH joy that can only be born out of DEEP sorrow. I can’t emphasize ENOUGH that what I find most amazing about our Lord’s teaching about joy here is that it is uttered in the hours shortly before his betrayal and arrest. With the shadow of the Cross looming ever closer, he uses those dwindling moments NOT to lament “O Woe is me!” but to reassure his disciples that they would be able to do mighty works in his name, that they would never be alone, that he would return for them, and that HE would serve as their source of joy! The secret to his peace of heart in the hours shortly before his crucifixion was that his life was in full accord with the will of the Father, and that the result of his death would mean life for the rest of the world. That was a joy no event or situation could ever possibly rob him of.

Rev. Lloyd Ogilvie, the former pastor of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church and Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, told in one of his sermons how during one of the lowest periods of his life, he discovered the power of joy and how he could experience it even when he didn’t feel like it. Hear Dr. Ogilvie:

*This past year has been the most difficult year of my life. My wife has been through five major surgeries, radiation treatment, and chemotherapy. I am thankful that I now know she is going to make it. During the same year, I suffered the loss of several key staff teammates whose moves were very guided for them, but a source of pressure and uncertainty in my work. Problems which I could have tackled with gusto under normal circumstances seemed to loom in all directions. Discouragement lurked around every corner, trying to capture my feelings. Prayer was no longer a contemplative luxury, but the only way to survive. My own intercessions were multiplied by the prayers of others. Friendships were deepened as I was forced to allow people to assure me with words I had preached for years. No day went by without a conversation, letter, or phone call giving me love and hope.*

*The greatest discovery that I have made in the midst of all the difficulties is that I can have joy when I don’t feel like it—artesian joy. When I had every reason to feel beaten, I felt joy. As the prayers were being answered, the Holy Spirit infused a seemingly limitless flow of joy. In spite of everything, Christ gave me the conviction of being loved and the certainty that nothing could separate me from him. It was not happiness, gusto, or jolliness but a constant flow of the Spirit through me. At no time did he give me the easy confidence that everything would work out as I wanted it on my timetable, but that he was in charge and would give me and my family enough courage for each day: grace. Joy is always the result of that. I found that the more I recaptured the Lord’s limitless love, the more joy I felt. The gift and the Giver were one. What I had told others thousands of times I now knew for myself: joy is a fruit, a manifestation of the indwelling Holy Spirit.*

Church, when we have Jesus Christ in our midst, his Spirit engenders within our OWN spirit his love, his confidence, and his joy. Jesus Christ is SYNONYMOUS with joy. As we saw, at his birth, the angels proclaimed, “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people.” His preaching and teaching was intended to help restore the joy of his people. And when it was time for him to leave this world, he reassured his followers, “So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you.” The greatest attribute of the early church, the greatest description of their

fellowship together which separated them from every OTHER body or assembly, was their JOY. It wasn't some shallow or superficial emotion they felt but the confidence of knowing that in every situation, they were sustained by the personal presence and love and support of both their Lord and of their spiritual family- the Church. They knew they would NEVER be alone, NEVER be forsaken, NEVER be rejected so long as Christ and his Church were in the world. As they abided in the vine, the love that the Father bestowed upon the Son now became THEIRS. As his sap--his love--flowed in them and through them, they in turn found it easier to channel it to one another and even to others "not of that fold," to persons as much in need of love and fellowship as THEY were.

Well, that same promise of that same love is given to US this morning, and HIS life, HIS energy, and HIS Spirit now flows in and through US as well. Like those early disciples, we find OURSELVES the beneficiaries of his grace and special care. CHRIST'S love becomes OUR love and CHRIST'S joy becomes OUR joy. My question to YOU this morning is this: Is this REAL to you? Is this more than just some kind of theological exercise but a TRUTH that has worked its way from your head straight into your heart, down into your very SOUL? Where is YOUR love? Are you modeling the same kind of life that Christ HIMSELF embodied? Are you a faithful conduit or channel of his concern and compassion to those around you? And where is your JOY? Are you able to rejoice even in the midst of the most difficult situations because you know that you are never alone, that Christ is genuinely present to YOU? Can you really trust in his promise that, along with his Body, the Church, he will always be there to help you through every trial, through every rough spot in the road? When such joy is ABSENT, that is a clear indication that something is wrong in our relationship to God and to one another, and we need to speak to Jesus about it. HE will help us- he PROMISES us that! Yes, love and joy remain the two great hallmarks of our faith. By making them the centerpiece in our hearts, we can know that we do INDEED abide in him and that our lives WILL be full. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, even as Jesus was one with your will and loved his followers as you loved him, help us in turn to be faithful conduits of that love to those all around us. May we not close our eyes to them simply because we find ourselves inconvenienced by their needs, but may we serve them with an uncommon compassion that, like you, OUR joy may truly be full. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*