

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church

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2nd Sunday of Advent

Rev. Susan M. Fleenor, Pastor

ADVENT SERIES: 2. THE GIFT OF JOY

Isaiah 12:2-6 Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 1:46-55

Whether or not you have or will have a Christmas tree in your home this year, last Sunday I invited you to imagine that there are four extra special gifts under your tree. The gift tag on each box says... “To: My disciples From: Jesus”. Last Sunday we unwrapped and contemplated the first gift – the gift of hope. This Sunday let’s unwrap and contemplate the gift of joy.

Notice that we are opening this gift in a season call Advent. Advent means “coming” and this season reminds us that someone is coming. Jesus is coming – he came first as a babe in a manger and as our resurrected Lord he is coming again with power and glory. To know that Jesus is coming is to know joy, because it means that God has acted in history. God in Jesus was born in Bethlehem. God in Jesus came to dwell among us full of grace and truth. God in Jesus destroyed the powers of death and darkness. To know that God in Jesus has come to us is to hear what the shepherds heard from the angel of the Lord that first Christmas night:

“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.” To know that God in Jesus has come and is coming - is to join Mary in singing “... my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Notice that it is Mary’s spirit that overflows with joy. The gift of joy like the gift of hope is a dimension of the spirit. Unlike happiness that is outside of us, dependent on what’s happening in our lives, joy is within us. I like what the great evangelist E. Stanley Jones once said in this regard, “When I met Jesus Christ, I felt I had swallowed sunshine.” If we have fully received the gift of God in Jesus Christ, then joy resides within us. Unlike happiness that is fleeting, dependent on context and circumstances, joy is an unceasing fountain of sunshine that bubbles in our hearts and overflows in our lives.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice!”, Paul writes to the Philippian Christians. Remember that Paul is writing his epistle of joy from prison. His situation wasn’t the most happy of circumstances and yet his joy in the Lord was not shaken. His words echo that of the prophet Isaiah who was ministering to God’s people during a time of great turmoil and social corruption. It was not a happy time and yet he encourages the people with these words, “Shout aloud and sing for joy.” Why? Because he believed that God was coming. Joy is ours in the Holy One of Israel who comes in Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem.

In John Steinbeck's book *Burning Bright*, Joe Saul longs for a baby. When his wife tells him she is pregnant, he dances for joy. He tells his close friend he wants to buy his wife a wonderful present that will delight and please her. He describes this desire as a compulsion. It is something he has to do. Trying to explain his feelings to his friend, he says, "My joy requires a symbol." The symbol of our joy is Jesus. And yet he is more than a symbol, his joy resides in us. Remember what Jesus tells his disciples as he is about to leave them, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full." (John 15:11) So how might we cultivate this joy in our lives, in our spiritual journey? Let me offer some suggestions.

1. When you are not feeling particularly joyful, meditate on one of the many assurances from scripture that give rise to joy. For me it would a favorite verse from a psalm that affirms that I belong to God, "O God, in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy" (Psalm 63:7). Say it with me.
2. The root meaning of the word joy in the biblical Greek is "gladness". When you are finding no reason to be glad, finding it difficult to pray perhaps, try a breath prayer. Breathe in and say, "My joy," and breathe out and say, "is in God." (Let's practice.) A simple breath prayer is way to place ourselves in God's embrace and to know gladness and joy again.
3. Another way to cultivate joy in your life is to rejoice in the good fortune of others. Express your delight in their joy by sending them a card or giving them a call. Celebrate others' joy by remembering them in your prayers. Consider how often we pray for people in times of pain and heartache, loss and illness. Why not give God thanks for their joy, after all scripture calls us to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). When we celebrate others' joy we are challenging the human tendency to believe that there is a limited supply of joy in the world. Our joy in God who loves us beyond measure is limitless.
4. Bring to heart and mind those people who have been joyful saints in your life. How is that joy expressed in them? How do they cultivate it? How has their joy spilled over into your life? Just as there are people in our lives who mentor us in the way of joy there are others who stifle your joy. Certainly pray for them, love them, but for your joy's sake consider how to limit the time you spend with them.

5. Did you know that early Christians expressed their delight in God through dance? Consider the Shakers who are an offshoot of the Quakers who came to this country from England in the 1780's. The Shakers were best known for the fervor of their worship services. Like the Quakers, Shakers would sit in silent meditation, waiting to be "moved by the Spirit," but the Shakers' response to this spiritual power was to tremble violently (hence "Shakers") and to spin and dance. So nurture your joy in the Lord with dance. Go dancing with your partner, family, or friends. When playing with your children and grandchildren put on some music and dance around the room together. Rent a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie or any movie about dance and give yourself permission to leap and twirl around the room. And if your body is unable to do so, imagine your spirit dancing for joy.
6. As you might expect, another way to take delight in God and to nurture the gift of joy given us in Christ Jesus is to sing. In this season, play and sing Christmas Carols often. Many years ago now the rock group Three Dog Night took a phrase from the familiar carol and it became a Top-40 hit. (Sing) "Joy to the world, all the boys and girls. Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea. Joy to you and me." (Invite to sing with me a second time.) Sing joy to the world all through the year.
7. Also invite joy into your life by staging celebrations – not just birthdays and anniversaries which come around once a year but toast moments of joy you notice as you go through your day. There's a wonderful children's book called *I'm in Charge of Celebrations* (Byrd Baylor with pictures by Peter Parnall) that's about a little girl who creates her own holidays. At one point she says, "Last year I gave myself one hundred and eight celebrations – besides the ones that close school for." What might you find to celebrate this day, this week that will nurture the gift of joy within you? Or sometime on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day this year, perhaps as you sit down to a meal with family and friends, share with one another the most joyous moment you experienced in the last year and celebrate all those joys with a toast or a prayer. Remember that life is not meant to be endured; it is to be enjoyed.
8. Joy also blooms and grows in us when we express gratitude, when we practice love and kindness, and more than anything when we help others. As Mother Teresa once said, "She gives most who gives with joy." Think of the times when an act of service gave you great joy. On your journey to Bethlehem and to Christmas this year, help someone, be of service, and notice how joyful your soul is as a result.

I hope some or all of these suggestions resonate with you and will be helpful as you are intentional about cultivating joy in your life. Lest we forget, the source of our joy is God who gifted us with God's very self in a little baby boy born in a manger. In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, is a statue about 19 inches high made of terra cotta. It was purchased by the museum in 1858 in Paris and is a sculpture of the Virgin and Child. No one knows who made it. It is likely the product of the Italian Renaissance. The most interesting thing about the statue is when you see it, you laugh. You laugh because the child is laughing. The baby Jesus is looking at you as you look at him, and he is laughing.

Joy has everything to do with a close and intimate relationship with God, who loves enough to come to be with us in Jesus Christ. Joy is one of the gifts of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ that is worth unwrapping and receiving. And when we do so fully it brings with it the joy of knowing that we are loved beyond measure and valued beyond compare.

(Some of the content of this sermon is inspired by Philip H. Barnart's sermon for Dec. 13, 2009 called "Singing Joy", The Clergy Journal, Sept/Oct 2009, pp. 21-22)

Let us pray.

Good and Glorious God, we thank you for the gift of joy that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is a joy unaffected by context and circumstances. Help us to receive this gift fully and thus know the joy that is ours because of your abiding and unending love for us. Help us to rejoice in you always especially in times of heartache and pain. Bless our desire to cultivate joy in our lives, our relationships, and our world. With good Christian friends everywhere, may we ever be people who rejoice, all for your glory and praise. Amen.