

“The Gift of Joy”

© 2008 Rev. James L. Perry, Jr.
East Cobb United Methodist Church
December 14, 2008

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

[Begin by showing the 2009 Acura automobile commercial from You Tube located at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ-KIASSBQs.¹ Stop the video where the new car driver says, “wow!” and cut the dealer information at the end.]

The bold assertion in this car commercial is that “the joy is back.” Back from where? Why are we not joyful already? And what is it about gifts under the tree and new cars that can possibly bring us joy?

Today we continue our sermon series on “The Gifts of Christmas.” This is not just an Advent series but will go through Christmas and conclude on December 28. Rather than focus on the commercial gifts we would like to receive, we are using this series to focus on the gifts God gives to all of us – without exception – if we are receptive to God. Two weeks ago, we unwrapped the Gift of Hope – something the world really needs more of these days. Last week, we unwrapped the Gift of Comfort, reminding ourselves that God is in all the circumstances of life. If we seek God, he will abide with us and sustain us through all of life’s difficulties. Today, we unwrap the Gift of Joy. I have a package here that has “Joy” on the tag. I do not know what is in the package, so let’s find out together what the Worship Ministry Team decided to place in this package to represent joy. [Open the package, take out the contents, and ad lib the significance of the contents to the joy we seek in our lives. Place the gift on the altar.]

What Is Joy?

Unfortunately, too many of us equate joy with what we saw in the video. Retailers and advertisers would have you believe that if you have enough of the right kinds of “stuff,” then you will indeed be joyful, happy, and the terms are used interchangeably by most of society today. Happiness may be a consequence of joy, but happiness alone is not joy, and we must not confuse the two. Joy is from the Greek *chara*, which means calm delight, contentment, and gladness, and is something much deeper than happiness. In Greek, Joy comes from the same root as the word grace (*charis* in Greek) which should give us a clue about the relationship between our joy and our salvation.

The root of happiness is *hap*, meaning chance (as in happenstance or haphazard.) Happiness depends on things going our way, whereas joy is based on the knowledge of the presence of God with us at all times, from the very beginning. Joy is something we can celebrate even when things are not going our way, even in the midst of grief and sadness. As Barbara Brown Taylor has written, “The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room.”²

While happiness is dependent on things going well in our lives, Joy is not dependent on outside forces. Happiness requires positive conditions: good health, right relationships, a good job, shelter, food, clothing. Joy, on the other hand, can be found even when these other conditions do not exist. As Frederick Buechner writes: “God created us in joy and

created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy. Whatever else it means to say that we are created in God's image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in God, even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted, God's mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood."³

Joy Is A Gift

Joy is a gift. Unlike all the things we saw in our video, joy does not cost money. The joy of the Lord cannot be bartered for or obtained from any store. It is available to us because God loves us.

The concepts of joy and what it means to rejoice are found throughout the readings for Advent and Christmas. In the reading from Isaiah, the prophet proclaims that God has sent him to bring "glad tidings to the poor." Jesus read this scripture in Luke 4 when he was given the scroll of Isaiah to read in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry. Then later in the passage, in verse 10, Isaiah's account says,

'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.'

These readings have their basis in the Hebrew language, which has more words for joy and rejoicing than any other language, and this from a language known for having few words. In the Old Testament, 13 Hebrew roots, found in 27 different words, are used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship.

- 1) Hebrew religious ritual proclaims God as the source of joy.
- 2) In contrast to the rituals of other faiths of the East, Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration.
- 3) A good Israelite regarded the act of thanking God as the supreme joy of his life.
- 4) Pure joy is joy in God as both its source and object, like a circle: God gives joy to us and we return it back to God. This is God's will for us to be joyful, to pray continuously and to give God thanks in all circumstances as.

Note how the author of Isaiah is connecting joy with salvation. He is joyful *because* he has been given the "garments of salvation." We should be joyful *because* it is the gift God has made available to us because of his act of salvation in our lives.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, Paul tells us:

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

There is a story told about a man from Louisville, Kentucky, who had to travel to St. Louis on business. This was years ago when Christians still kept Sunday as a very special day. For this man, "keeping the Sabbath" meant not riding the trains on Sunday. So, after he finished up his business late Saturday night, he had to stay over in St. Louis until the following Monday morning. On Sunday morning, he left the hotel looking for a place to worship. The streets were quite deserted, but finally he saw a policeman and asked him for directions to the nearest Protestant church. The stranger thanked the policeman for the information and was about to walk off when he turned and asked the policeman: "Why have you recommended that particular church? There must be several churches nearby that you could have recommended." The policeman smiled and replied: "I'm not a church man myself, but the people who come out of that church are the happiest looking church people in St. Louis. I thought that would be the kind of church you would like to attend." ⁴

Dwelling In Joy

Joy shows! And it is our great privilege to dwell in the joy of knowing that nothing we can do will ever separate us from the love of God. That is the depth and breadth of God's grace, which is all-sufficient, a grace that calls us to say thank-you in this hour as the first step ... before we take on the other 167 hours of our week.

So, what do I mean by dwelling in joy? This joy is a gift - a gift we can never earn. A gift we receive simply because we are. A gift that defies all of our conventional thinking with our feeble, temporal minds. It is a gift with the power to reorient every aspect of our lives, if we can accept it and learn to cherish it for what it is. But that's the part where I so often fail and perhaps you do to. Think about what we do with the gifts we receive in other parts of our lives and whether that applies to our faith. We receive a gift and might enjoy it for a while, but then we forget about it ... or get another gift that preoccupies us anew. Or, like a sweater or a tie or some sort of gadget, we smile when we receive it. With all sincerity, we think to ourselves – and tell the person who gave it – that we will enjoy wearing or using it. But before long it is buried in the closet or in a box with other forgotten gifts in the attic, out of sight and out of mind.

Or, even worse, we decide right off that it is not right for us. We might hold onto it for some mentally prescribed amount of time ... knowing all the while that it is destined for Goodwill or, perhaps, to be re-gifted when the chance arises.

That is not what God had in mind when God gave us the gift of joy that comes with knowing we belong to God forever. Nor is it God's intent for us to do with this gift of joy what we do with other things in our lives, which is to equate it to something of this world. This gift of joy is not as simple as having a positive attitude or a feeling of self-sufficiency. Doing that only makes both the activity and the result all about us.

This joy is not the same as the pursuit of happiness, as laudable as that may be, or a commitment to have more fun, something we might "calendar" in our busy lives, as if to say: "I have opening in my schedule on Tuesday afternoon; I will have fun then."

This gift is not something that we have to rationalize or justify as a valid use of our time. And it surely is not something you can stick in your pocket or your purse today because you heard a sermon and sang a few hymns that mentioned joy. It's also not something we have to be able to afford. The price has been paid, and there will be no bill in January.

This gift of joy is far greater, far more transcendent ... because it is the joy that comes from the knowledge of what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ. It can be elusive. But if we ever find it and accept it, it is all sufficient.

Consequences of Losing Your Joy

David Padfield tells us what it looks like when we lose our joy:

"We have all known Christians who go through life looking like they were weaned on a dill pickle and baptized in vinegar. They sit in the pew like they are at a funeral, and when they stick out their hands after the service, you're not sure whether to shake it or pray for it. If Christianity makes you miserable, then you do not have Christianity, but just a poor substitute for your dried up, miserable soul. This lack of joy is so easy to spot, and the "Christianity" they offer so repulsive, that no one in their right mind would want it."

Supreme Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."

Imagine the impact on those in our world who do not know Christ when we do not dwell in and function out of the joy that God has given us.

Is Something Stealing Your Joy?

At this time of year, we need to let joy into our hearts. If your heart is aching this Advent season for any reason: the loss of love in a marriage, the memory of someone you love who is now with God, concern about a teenage child, concerns about your health, don't let despair defeat you. If something stands in the way of joy, let it go.

One of the things which I have seen stand in the way of joy is people taking themselves or what they do too seriously. We need to laugh at ourselves, because others will be more than willing to do so for us. When I believe someone is being too serious, I will often joke with them in the hope that laughter will bring them back to reality. We are laughable at times - I know that I am - and what we do is just a job or an appointed position, something that in the big picture is not worth getting upset with another person over, and something which could be taken away at any time.

Enjoy life, relish every moment, for we know "not the day nor the hour," Jesus said. Find some way this special season to overcome the concerns of life. Consider doing something for shut-ins who have no one to care for them. Do something positive, something heart-warming, something that will bring someone else joy. When you do that, you are letting the joy of God's presence in your life shine through to positively influence the lives of others.

Joy is "a great mystery, not a commodity that can be consumed or rendered useful. But a gift of one who simply delights and makes the heart joyful."⁵

Is Our Greatest Sin Our Lack of Joy?

Father Alexander Schmemmann wrote that the greatest sin of all was to lose sight of joy in worship. Schmemmann wrote: "I think God will forgive everything except lack of joy; when we forget that God created the world and saved it. Joy is not one of the components of Christianity – it is the *tonality* of Christianity that penetrates everything – *faith and vision*. Where there is no Joy, Christianity becomes fear and therefore torture."⁶ And it is that kind of joy we are prone to forget ... why we need to be reminded as the David wrote: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." (Psalm 51:12)

Hundreds of years later, our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Ask and you will receive." Not the items on our Christmas list, but the greatest gifts of all – hope comfort, peace, and yes, JOY. In John 15, Jesus said that he had come so that his JOY could be in us, and that our joy may be complete.

Is something stealing your joy today? If someone broke in and stole your Christmas presents, you would be furious. Yet, the greed of humanity; the way we treat others; the commercialization – "Dear Santa, I want it ALL!" Maybe these things don't really steal our joy. Maybe we trade our joy for something of less value. As we continue to prepare our hearts to make room for the celebration of Christ's coming and the rebirth of Christ in each of our hearts, let us pray with David, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." Pray to God and praise God. God still inhabits the praises of his people. Let every heart prepare him room, and JOY will come!

Prayer

¹ From Acura automobile commercial from You Tube located at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ-KIASSBQs, 2009.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," in [*The Living Pulpit*](#), October-December 1996, Volume 5, No. 4, p. 16.

³ Frederick Buechner, from [*The Longing for Home*](#), as quoted in [*The Living Pulpit*](#), October-December 1996, Volume 5, No. 4, p. 37.

⁴ From *Be Joyful. Dynamic Preaching for the Third Sunday of Advent*. Copyright 1996 by Seven Worlds Corporation, Knoxville, TN.

⁵ From *The Joy of Ministry*, Thomas W. Currie III p. 11

⁶ *The Journals of Father Alexander Schemann*, 1973-1983. P 147