

## *Joy in Believing*

Romans 15:13, Luke 1:47, Psalm 16:8-11

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The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin word for “rejoice.” The first word in the introit to the mass was “Gaudete” in the verse “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say: rejoice!” The other candles of Advent are purple, the color of repentance, because Advent wasn’t just preparation for Christmas—it was a somber time of fasting. But this Sunday the candle is “gaudy” pink, the color of joy.

In today’s Gospel reading, Mary sings, “My spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior.” The whole story of Jesus’ birth is full of joy. Elizabeth rejoices when Mary visits her, and Mary responds with joy. Zechariah is joyful when John the Baptist is born. The angels outside Bethlehem bring news of great joy. The shepherds rejoice when they see baby Jesus. The Magi rejoice when they find him. The old man Simeon rejoices that he is able to see the arrival of God’s salvation before he dies.

What ties all of those together is that people experience joy when they see that God is at work to save his people. One dictionary of the New Testament (*EDNT*) says that joy is “the primary mode of the appropriation of the eschatological event of salvation by human beings.” To put that in less academic language: when we are exposed to God’s coming into the world to save us—what some would call the kingdom of God and others would call “the salvation event”—the way we receive that knowledge and the way it becomes real to us is *joy*.

There is a difference between joy and happiness. Happiness may be caused by a warm puppy, or a warm gun, or whatever you want for Christmas. Happiness depends on happenings, but joy depends on God being God and doing his thing in the world. S. D. Gordon, the Boston pastor of a hundred years ago for whom Gordon College is named, put it nicely: “Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross.”

The New Testament is full of talk of rejoicing in suffering or in persecution. Remember the last of Jesus’ beatitudes: “Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad!” Paul says, “Be joyful always—in all circumstances.” He describes himself as “sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” James starts out his letter by saying, “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.” So there’s this kind of disconnect between external events and the reality of inner joy. When we share our “joys and concerns” at the end of the service, the joys are almost always good things that have happened to us. But the New Testament reminds us that there is a joy that has its source in God and in his saving work in the world.

Has it ever struck you as odd that in the Bible joy is *commanded*? Can you command someone to be joyful? Paul does it repeatedly: “Be joyful always.” “Be joyful in hope.” “Rejoice in the Lord always.” The book of Psalms does the same thing, issuing commandments. Does it make sense to tell people they *have* to be happy, or else? Is it like your Mom telling you before you go to Grandma’s house, “Have a good time, darn it”? No, the fact that we are commanded to be joyful tells us that we are not talking about an emotion or something on a feeling level that is

beyond our control. If we are commanded to be joyful, there must be something we can do, there must be a choice to be made. If we are commanded to be joyful, it must be possible.

As a third-century man (Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage) was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians--and I am one of them."

What can we learn today about the secret of that joy? My attention was drawn this week to the blessing we said together earlier, from Romans 15:13—"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing." First, I was struck that all three of our Advent candles are mentioned in that verse: hope, peace, and joy. Second, that joyfulness and peacefulness seem to go together as a kind of package, and that's true in other verses as well. But third, I began to wonder what it meant that God fills us with joy and peace "in believing." It is through the act of believing that God is able to fill us with joy. Some translations read that we will be filled with joy and peace "in faith," but in the Greek it's a verb—in believing, or as some translations render it, "as you trust in him."

During the commercial Christmas season it's not unusual to see the word "Believe" carved in wood on someone's mantel, or printed on a card or a T-shirt as a kind of holiday motto. Macy's parade featured red star balloons with the word "Believe" and the same word mounted on the front of the Herald Square department store. I have the suspicion that for most people that word "Believe" means "believe in Santa," believe in Christmas, or believe in magic. But for us Christians, believe is that key word in the New Testament that means not just to believe intellectually in the reality of something that doesn't seem real, but to trust that reality and ground yourself in it completely. The Greek verb for believe is *pistuo*, which is sometimes translated "believe" as in John 3:16, but it is often translated as "have faith in" or "trust." The source of joy in believing is not so much getting past reason and science to believe in what seems implausible; the source of joy is having a secure confidence in a reality beyond yourself that is good and just, knowing that God can be trusted, so you have nothing to worry about, so that you can sing songs in the night.

In the Psalms there are many, many expressions of joy. The songwriters rejoice because of God's deliverance, his protection, his steadfast love, his forgiveness, his justice, his care. I want you to look at—or at least listen to—one psalm in particular, Psalm 16. It's a wonderful picture of someone who has found joy in God rather than in things that happen to him. Verse 8 sets the stage; you see the basic mindset:

*I keep the Lord always before me;  
because he is at my right hand,  
I shall not be moved.*

I am secure and steadfast because I keep my mind fixed on God and his presence, his availability to help me. Verse 9 goes on,

*Therefore my heart is glad,  
and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.*

Because I can trust the Lord, therefore my heart is glad, therefore my soul rejoices (as Mary said). And even my body loses its tension and anxiety; it rests secure. Verse 10:

*For you do not give me up to Sheol,*

*or let your faithful one see the Pit.*

Whatever happens, no matter what my enemies do to me, I know that God will never let me go to hell. It may seem like a strange source of confident joy to you, but I love it: the worst my enemies can do is kill me; they can never separate me from your love. Then, finally, verse 11:

*You show me the path of life.*

*In your presence there is fullness of joy;*

*in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

There you have it: the place to find joy is God's presence. It turns out that rejoicing in God my Savior is pretty much the same things as "delighting yourself in the Lord." The way we obey the command to be joyful is to believe; the God of hope fills us with joy *in believing*—as we choose to trust in God, to think of him as dependable and dependably loving. And in this Advent season, we focus on the historical fact that God came to us in human form in the person of Jesus—that salvation did not remain a distant hope but became a present and available reality. When the new age of salvation was announced, faithful believers rejoiced—and now we too rejoice.

There is a beautiful verse in the last part of Isaiah, 61:10:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,*

*my soul shall be joyful in my God,*

*for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,*

*he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.*

Christians have always read that to mean that God has put Christ "on" us as a new self, that we have been clothed with Christ's nature and his righteousness. For the prophet it clearly means that God has made him right with God, and has saved him from either slavery or destruction. And that experience of salvation—seeing and believing that God's saving purpose in this world has extended to me, personally—is the reason that he rejoices, the reason his soul is joyful. If you want to find joy in your life, the secret is that you have to believe what is right before you: that God has already acted to save your soul and your life in Jesus Christ. Not that he has offered a way to salvation, but that he has accomplished salvation and made us humans right with himself. If you are going through the run-up to Christmas sometimes happy, sometimes sad, but not experiencing this deep secure joy that exists deeper than circumstances, the invitation today is to let God fill you with joy and peace *in believing*.

It really happened back in 1981 that Doug Whitt and his new bride arrived at their hotel's bridal suite in the wee hours of the morning. They saw a sofa, chairs, and table, but where was the bed? Then they discovered that the sofa was a hide-a-bed, with a lumpy mattress and sagging springs. They spent a fitful night and woke up in the morning. The new husband went to the hotel desk and gave the clerk a piece of his mind. The clerk asked him, "Did you open the door in the room?" Doug went back to the room. He saw a door they had thought was a closet. When he opened it, there was a beautiful bedroom with a fruit basket and chocolates waiting for them.

[Cynthia Thomas, *Leadership*, Vol 15, no.1] Some of us have been living the Christian life in the foyer, sleeping on the sofa. The bedroom is ready and God is waiting there to meet us. Joy is there, but we have to open the door.

Jesus said in John 15:11 (NIV), "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The joy that Jesus wants us to enter into is his own joy, the joy that he has in oneness with the Father, the joy of complete confidence in the triumph of God. Jesus did not teach us to be "men of sorrow" but to be people of joy, people rejoicing like the people in his parables because we have found a priceless treasure or something we thought was lost forever.