

“God With Us: Joy”

Isaiah 35:1-10 • Romans 12:1-13

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 23, 2018

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. That means that tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I hope you're as excited as I am to come worship and celebrate the birth of Jesus tomorrow evening. One of the highlights of the service of course is the candle lighting. It begins with the lighting of the Christ Candle on the Advent wreath at the beginning of the service reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world. Then near the end of the service we take that light from the Christ candle and share it with each other reminding us that the good news of Jesus is shared from one person to another.

Matthew chapter one tells us that an angel, a messenger from God, came to Joseph after he found out that Mary was pregnant. The angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child is from the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 22 Matthew says, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Isaiah]: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).” Over the past few weeks of Advent we've been talking about the difference it makes in our world and in *our* lives that God is with *us*. That's what the candles of the Advent wreath represent.

We started by lighting the candle of hope. Hope is more than just wishing. Hope comes from a reasonable expectation that something will happen. Our hope is based on God's promises to forgive us and to save us and the proof of those promises is the Resurrection of Jesus. The second candle was the candle of peace. Life can get pretty crazy, especially around Christmas. But you can have real, lasting, deep peace even in the midst of big challenges. We experience that peace by getting close to Jesus through his Word and through his church.

The third candle is the candle of joy. Joy is one of the prominent themes through the

entire Bible. In fact, the word “joy” is used over 200 times and the word “rejoice,” which is the verb form of joy, is used another 200 times. Nearly a fourth of each of those are in the Psalms, where we're commanded to shout and sing for joy. Psalm 100 says, “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.” Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. When the angel appeared to the shepherds to announce Jesus' birth he said, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” And Paul writes to the Colossians that he is praying for their joy. Followers of Jesus should be known as joyful people.

But somewhere along the line it seems like something went wrong. If you look at old photographs of church people they don't seem very happy. Presbyterians were particularly guilty of this. “Stern” and “Presbyterian” just seemed to go together. One of the reasons may be because they were taught to be that way. The 1894 Presbyterian *Directory for Worship*, which was sort of a guide to help churches worship, said, “When the time appointed for public worship is come, let the people enter the church and take their seats in a decent, *grave*, and reverent manner. It then goes on to say, “let all the people attend with gravity and reverence;...abstaining from all whisperings, from salutations of persons present or coming in; and from gazing about, sleeping, *smiling*, and all other improper behavior.” Did you catch that? Smiling in church was considered improper behavior. Somehow our predecessors got the idea that joy and church shouldn't go together. You can hear the Apostle Paul saying in Galatians 4:15, “What has happened to all your *joy*?” As C.S. Lewis famously said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” And the great evangelist Billy Sunday once said, “If you have

no joy in your religion, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere."

We often confuse joy with happiness. Happiness comes from your circumstances. If things are going well, you may be happy. But no one is happy all the time. There are times when it's appropriate to be sad or even angry. But it is possible to have joy even when things are not going well. Joy is our response to God's activity in our lives and in the world. Joy comes from experiencing God's salvation.

Now as we turn our attention to the twelfth chapter of Romans I want to give you the secret to real joy. You might want to write this down because it will save you a lot of money on self-help books about making joy. Ready? The secret to joy is JOY. J-O-Y. That stands for Jesus, Others, and You. When you put your priorities in this order you unlock the secret to joy regardless of your happiness. Let's look at each of these.

The first thing I want us to understand about joy is that it's the result of being loved by Jesus. When His undeserved grace and forgiveness are finally able to penetrate through the thick layers of self-doubt that we create, we begin to feel the surge of joy. Of course this is not easy for us. We find it difficult to let Christ love us and change us. For some of us, it's hard to imagine that God could possibly love us in spite of all the things we've done wrong.

Or we try to earn God's favor. We feel like if we can just *do* the right things or at least *think* the right thoughts, then we deserve God's favor. But when we think that way we completely miss the meaning of grace. The last thing we want from God is what we deserve. That's where grace comes in. Grace is unmerited favor. In other words, grace means we get something we don't deserve at all – namely salvation.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul tells us to make Jesus the number one priority in our lives. That's hard. It's hard because it means that whatever we've made most important has to move. It's usually ourselves. You have to get off the throne of your life and let Jesus take His

rightful place. Paul writes, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." How do we do that? One of the ways is to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Every moment of every day is an opportunity to be in the presence of Christ by using your mind.

So if the first key to unlocking joy in your life is Jesus, the second key is "others." Verse 3 says, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think." Joy is the result of love and love is fueled by joy. Real love is not a feeling or an emotion. Real love is an act of the will. What Jesus demonstrated for us is that true love involves sacrifice. To love someone you must put that person's needs and interests ahead of your own. That's how it works in marriage and in friendship and in the church. Paul uses the analogy of a body with all the different parts working together. Then in verses 6-8 he mentions several gifts that God gives us. Notice that each of these gifts is given to you for the benefit of others – prophecy, serving, teaching, preaching, giving, leading, and acts of mercy. God has given each one of you a particular set of gifts and the reason He gave them to you is for you to use them for other people. Verse 6 says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...*with cheerfulness.*" As you think about the gifts God has given you – time, skills, knowledge, money – recognize that He expects you to use them for His Kingdom first.

That brings us to *you*. In Luke 6 Jesus said, "forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

If you love Jesus enough to put Him first in your life, and love other people enough to put serving them second, you will find that you have more joy by being in third place than you would have by trying to take care of yourself first. That's because love and joy can't be

bought and it can't be made. The irony is that the more you try to make yourself love or have joy, the less of each you will have because you will be focused on what you don't have. But the more you sacrificially love and give, the more love and joy you will experience.

What difference does it make having God with us? All the difference. We can have real joy

because of Jesus, joy that is deeper than our sadness or our anger or anything else in our life. That's the joy that the angels announced to the shepherds and it's joy that they announce to you, too. But to have that joy requires keeping Jesus, others, and yourself in the proper order. Think about that.

Amen.