

JOY



The Fuel of the Christian Life

2022 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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JOY

The Fuel of the Christian Life

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” (1 Peter 1:8)

Rejoice! Joyful, Joyful! I bring you good news of great joy! The Christmas season is filled with words of joy. It is a pleasure to hear these wonderful words, sing them and repeat them during the Advent season. We read of joy in the prophecies about the birth of Jesus, in the events of his birth, and in the future hope we have because we trust in the one who was born in a stable 2000 years ago. Do we believe that we, as Christians, can have joy? True joy that is greater than the happiness this world offers? In this year’s Advent Devotional we will consider joy: what is it, and what is it not, where our joy comes from, and how we can know that we have it.

Dane Ortlund writes this: “The difference between a Christian life with or without joy is the difference between a boat being driven along by a tired oarsman or by a sail full of the wind... Joy is the fuel of the Christian life.”

Joy is not merely an emotion, but a heart affection that moves us to action. Joy is like light, radiating from God, through the life of his Son, Jesus, through the working of the Holy Spirit. Joy is a result of the presence of Jesus in our lives, as we grow to know the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As we come to know and experience joy more fully, I pray that we will grow as joyful followers of Jesus, rejoicing in every circumstance, during this Advent season!

Christmas blessings,

Pastor Craig

Monday, November 28

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” (1 Peter 1:8)

In this first week, we will consider what joy is. If joy is “the fuel of the Christian life,” then what is joy? Peter, who was one of the three men in Jesus’ inner circle, wrote a pivotal verse regarding joy. Let’s think about 1 Peter 1:8. In Jesus’ lifetime, Peter was his close friend. He spent time with Jesus daily and experienced highs and lows with him. The people to whom Peter wrote this letter (including us) never knew Jesus in person as Peter did. That could be an obstacle, but for those who know Jesus, it is a wonderful testimony.

Peter emphasized that, even though we did not see Jesus in the past, nor do we see him presently, Jesus still changes us. Those who follow Jesus love him – even today! Peter did not speak of mere emotion, rather he wrote about a personal, daily, intimate relationship with Jesus. Even though you don’t see him (think FaceTime or Zoom) you can develop a close, abiding relationship, by hearing from him through God’s Word, the Bible, by constant worship of Jesus, by speaking to him in prayer, and by fellowship with other believers.

Your relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit started because of belief. We have been included in the closest relationship that exists in the universe, the eternal relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

As we begin to think about joy, meditate on this foundational verse. 1 Peter 1:3-8 was written to people who know Jesus. Peter here assumes that followers of Jesus *“rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”* Is that true of you? Is it true of me?

Tuesday, November 29

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” (1 Peter 1:8)

Yesterday we thought about the first half of this verse. Let's consider the second half today. What gives you joy? Not simply what makes you feel happy, but rather what brings you deep, inner joy?

Read verses 3-6 in this chapter. You will see that Peter talks about the hope that we have that brings us joy, because of the resurrection of Jesus. Peter then proclaims in verse 8, *“you believe in him and rejoice with joy.”* These words are right next to each other in Greek – *rejoicing joy!*

“The contrast is clear: whereas in the earlier verse Peter spoke of strong rejoicing in a future hope, here he says that our personal, daily fellowship with Jesus Christ himself is cause for even greater rejoicing, *unutterable and exalted joy.*” This inexpressible, glorious joy is “joy that has been infused with heavenly glory and that still possesses the radiance of that glory’... It is thus joy that results from being in the presence of God himself, and joy that even now partakes of the character of heaven. It is the joy of heaven before heaven, experienced now in fellowship with the unseen Christ (Wayne Grudem).”

Wow! We have a foretaste of the joy of heaven, not because of circumstances or good events, but rather through the presence of God himself which yields an intimate relationship with Jesus. We never could have experienced an opportunity for this intimate relationship if God had not sent Jesus as Immanuel, God with us, and without the Holy Spirit coming to dwell among us!

Wednesday, November 30

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” (1 Peter 1:8)

Peter has so much to say about joy in 1 Peter 1:8. Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian who lived three hundred years ago, focused on this verse as he thought about joy. Let’s spend one more day examining what Peter wrote in these verses.

1 Peter 1:8 ends by describing their joy as “full of glory.” That might be an odd way for us to describe joy, but Peter thought differently. Peter was trying to teach us with this description. Jonathan Edwards writes,

“although the joy was unspeakable, and no words were sufficient to describe it... it is in the original, ‘glorified joy.’ In rejoicing with this joy, their minds were filled, as it were, with a glorious brightness, and their natures exalted and perfected: it was a most worthy, noble rejoicing... it was a [tasting beforehand] of the joy of heaven, that raised their minds to a degree of heavenly blessedness: it filled their minds with the light of God’s glory, and made [them] shine with some communication of that glory.”

That is quite a mouthful to digest! What Edwards is saying is that this joy the New Testament believers experienced, that we can experience as Christians today, is full of glory because it comes directly from God. It is a gift from God! Happiness comes from circumstances in this world, but joy comes only through loving God and believing in him. Joy sets us apart from the world because joy indicates a deeper, more abiding affection than anything the world offers.

As we step into December tomorrow, thank God for the opportunity to experience the joy that comes from him, not dependent on circumstances but rather dependent on our relationship with God!

Thursday, December 4

***“Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.”
(Psalm 97:11)***

This week we are laying the foundation for understanding joy. What is joy? How do we have it and experience it? Psalm 97:11 draws an analogy and makes a connection between light and joy. Let's think about that connection.

How is joy like light? How does light resemble joy? The first thing that comes to my mind is that light originates from another source. We don't make light, it comes from the sun, a light bulb, your cell phone, or fire, for example. The Psalmist says light “dawns” (probably more accurately than “sown”). Every day, whether it is clear or cloudy, the sun always rises. Dawn always breaks. How is joy similar to the dawning of the sun? Jonathan Edwards reflects on this verse as he thinks about joy.

“In casting Christian joy in terms of light and brightness Edwards is helping us feel the weight of joy as a reality that, when present, is all-enveloping, ever-flowing, life-giving, and beautiful. What the sun does to a valley as night gives way to day is what joy does to the Christian as the heart is filled with joy” (Dane Ortlund).

The sun bathes, envelopes, and covers a valley when it rises in the morning. So joy bathes, envelopes, and covers us as God shines on our hearts. When our hearts are aligned with God's heart, he will cover us with the light of joy to warm and comfort our souls (2 Chronicles 16:9). Check your heart and trust God today. Allow him to warm you with his joy.

Friday, December 2

“...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power...” (2 Timothy 3:4b-5a)

In this first week of our Advent devotional, we have thought about joy. What is it? How can we have it? 1 Peter 1:8 has shown us that joy has a connection with love, specifically love for God. *“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice...”* Joy comes from a strong and abiding affection or love for God and belief in him. This love is more than just a preference; it is different from me liking the Vikings more than the Bears, or choosing hamburgers over hot dogs. Love for God is a strong inclination of the will that causes us to act in a certain way.

Paul describes this in his second letter to Timothy. In his description of people who don't love God, he ends with this summary: they are *“lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”* They don't have joy because they don't have God. Joy, a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), only comes to those who are lovers of God (Col. 1:11; 1 Thess. 1:6). When we love pleasure rather than God, we lose all strength, because the joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10). It matters what you love and who you love.

As we move to wrap up week one of our celebration of Jesus' first coming and our anticipation of his second coming, think about your love and your joy. Put yourself on the pathway of God's joy, which is revealed as we turn our eyes and heart toward Jesus. Consider the things you love and choose. Cultivate joy in your heart, as a farmer cultivates their field. Prepare your heart for the planting of God's joy in you!

Saturday, December 3

“Though you do not now see him, you believe in him...” (1 Peter 1:8)

As we finish the first week of our devotional, we are also ending our topic, *What is joy?* Let's go back to our opening verse and focus on the phrase above and the topic of faith.

Recently I read a sermon from one of my favorite pastors, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Lloyd-Jones preached for many years in London before passing away in 1981. He made this statement about faith that caught my attention as I was thinking about the connection between joy and belief.

“Let me first of all put it negatively. Faith, obviously, is not a mere matter of feeling. It cannot be, because one's feelings in this kind of condition can be very changeable. A Christian is not meant to be dejected when everything goes wrong. He is told to 'rejoice'. Feelings belong to happiness alone, rejoicing takes in something much bigger than feelings; and if faith were a matter of feelings only, then when things go wrong and feelings change, faith will go. But faith is not a matter of feelings only, faith takes up the whole man including his mind, his intellect and his understanding. It is a response to truth...”

Peter, opening his letter to the exiled believers, desired to encourage the faith of his fellow suffering brothers and sisters in Christ. Peter wanted the believers – and us - to know that we walk and live by faith and not by sight, just as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:7. It's not about feelings. Feelings come and go. Faith trusts God confidently, regardless of feelings or circumstances. Joy in this world is in one sense a yearning or longing for the next, a hopeful expectation that we can now only experience in part.

As you consider your circumstances on this day, trust in God. Believe him and take him at his Word. Rejoice in God in the midst of and in spite of your circumstances. Prepare your heart to worship God on Sunday and thank him for the gift of his son, Jesus.

Sunday, December 4

***“Because of your promise, and according to your own heart,
you have brought about all this greatness,
to make your servant know it.” (2 Samuel 7:21)***

***“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly
with great joy.” (Matthew 2:10)***

What brought David such great joy in 2 Samuel 7? What brought the wise men so much joy in Matthew 2? God promised David the coming Messiah King, and the wise men witnessed their hope of the coming King fulfilled! Moving into week two of our Advent devotional, our theme this week will be: *joy is hope fulfilled*. We will look at various Old Testament prophecies that will, in the book of Matthew, find their fulfillment in Jesus. As that fulfillment brought joy to people in Jesus' time, it also brings joy to us as we see God's promises confirmed in Jesus. It's a hope fulfilled partly now, and fully in the new heavens and earth.

First, as we continue our series in the names of God on Sunday, we see David overjoyed with the blessing God has given him. God promised that the one who will come after David will *“build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”* (2 Samuel 7:13). David merely wanted to build a house for God. But God came back to David and promised to build a house/dynasty for David that would last forever and would be fulfilled by Jesus. God is David's *Adonai*, his Lord and Master, and our Lord as well.

The wise men were just some of many who saw this hope fulfilled. Matthew 2:1-12 relates the journey of the wise men to find Jesus. They followed a star in response to a prophecy in Numbers 24:17, *“a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”* They were looking for the ruler in the line of David, the line of Jacob. The star led them to Jesus, and they were overjoyed! I hope that you have the same joy in this hope fulfilled through the baby boy!

Monday, December 5

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

This week we will look at five separate prophecies fulfilled in Matthew 1-2, each of them in relation to the birth of Jesus. They will each help us to understand that joy is hope fulfilled. The first is the promise of the virgin birth of the Mighty God, Jesus. Matthew points this out in Matthew 1:22-23.

In Isaiah 7-11, Isaiah prophecies about the coming great King, the Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God. Isaiah tells us in these chapters about the one who would come. The prophetic sign given in Isaiah is that a virgin will give birth to a son. God's people, from that time on, were waiting, watching, and hoping for the coming Messiah. Those believed to be messiahs came and went, but they were not. Still, they waited.

Then, out of the blue, this young man Joseph has a dream, just before he is about to divorce his soon-to-be-wife. In this dream, the angel tells Joseph that the long-awaited Messiah would be born to his wife, Mary, a virgin! The combination of the visit of the angel, the event that had happened to Mary, and the prophecy of the virgin birth all came together to convince Joseph of the truth of the angel's statement. Hope was fulfilled through the birth of a baby boy!

Are you waiting for your hope to be fulfilled? Pray and trust God to work, and be open to what he wants to do.

Tuesday, December 6

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” (Micah 5:2)

The recipients of the second fulfillment of hope were a group of traveling wise men. The second hope fulfilled which brings joy is the promise of a birth in the town of Bethlehem, told in Matthew 1-2.

This entourage of Wise Men was composed of Magi, not kings. Magi, or Wise Men, studied the stars and interpreted dreams, much like Daniel of the Old Testament. But unlike Daniel, they were pagans, not Jews, and may have been looked down upon by Jews because of their association with astrology and magic.

The Wise Men had some knowledge of the prophecy of Balaam, *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...”* (Numbers 24:17). Even though they didn't believe in God, the birth of a great king, told in the stars, fascinated and attracted their attention.

The Wise Men followed the star – pagans from another land, probably Babylonia. It's just like God to include the story of people from a far-off nation among the first to visit Jesus. When Herod informed them of the place where Jesus was, the Wise Men headed to Bethlehem. Read their response in Matthew 2:10, *“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”* Their reaction echoes Peter's words in 1 Peter 1:8! The hope of these pagan men was fulfilled, and they worshipped Jesus! Pray today that God would fulfill the hope of people in your life who don't yet know Jesus, just like he did for the Wise Men.

Wednesday, December 7

“And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’” (Matthew 2:14–15)

As Matthew 2:13-15 sets the scene, the Wise Men had just departed to go home another way, because of a warning in a dream. Probably the very next day or night God warned Joseph in a similar way. Joseph and Mary were rightly afraid, and they fled to Egypt during the night to protect the Christ Child.

It is significant that the family ran to Egypt, illustrating how God foreshadowed the events of Matthew 2 in the Old Testament exodus from Egypt, according to author Douglas Sean O'Donnell. Israel itself in the Old Testament was called God's son. Hosea 11:1 reads, *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”* The pattern set in Exodus of God calling his son out of Egypt is then fulfilled as God calls his only Son out of Egypt. God loved his people the way a good father loves a son, and he continues to love us as a son, in and through his one and only Son, Jesus.

Jesus is the one and only Son who embodies the relationship the Father has with his children. Just as God called the nation of Israel out of Egypt, so he called his Son out of Egypt in this event. Jesus is the ultimate story of God bringing his people out of captivity into his promised land of a relationship with God and life with him forever.

This hope fulfilled should give us joy as well. God is in the business of protecting and providing for his children. He did that for Jesus, to fulfill the prophecy. God wants to protect and provide for his children today. Rejoice in the ways God has protected and provided for you in the past, and trust that God will do the same in the future.

Thursday, December 8

“Thus says the Lord: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.’”
(Jeremiah 31:15)

After the Wise Men tricked Herod by not returning with information about the child, Herod was furious. You can read Herod’s response in Matthew 2:16-18. He estimated when the star might have first appeared, then added a little time to determine which children to kill. He may have killed twenty to thirty innocent children in this horrible act. As Matthew remembers what happened, he quotes from Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah 31:15 may seem like a hopeless verse, but there is hope to be found.

“Matthew is saying that with the coming of Jesus, the time of the exile is coming to a close! He hinted at it in the last verse of the genealogy (1:17). Now he alludes to it through the prophets. The tears shed by the mothers in Bethlehem inaugurate the reign of the one who will shed tears of blood for the forgiveness of sin and who will eventually, in the restoration of all things, wipe every tear away (Revelation 21:4)” (Douglas Sean O’Donnell).

Bethlehem and Calvary are intimately connected. They are each a place where tremendous spiritual battles were fought. This illustrates that *we need Christmas*, as pastor and author Daniel Doriani writes. Yes, Christmas is a time to celebrate the beautiful birth of baby Jesus. Don’t forget that. We celebrate because we have been delivered from exile by Jesus, just as the children of Rachel were delivered in the Old Testament. Our hope is fulfilled through this final deliverer, Jesus! That is cause for great joy!

Friday, December 9

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.” (Isaiah 11:1)

Unlike Bethlehem, there is no specific prophecy about Nazareth in the Old Testament. That town is never even named in the Old Testament. Commentators like Douglas Sean O'Donnell see a clue in Isaiah 11:1. Jesse was the father of David, and the shoot from Jesse is David and his lineage that leads to Jesus.

Here is where the connection is found. The Hebrew word for branch is *neser*. In English, we add “city” to a word to name a location (like Tower City, Lake City). In Hebrew, you would add the ending *eth* to a word to name a location. The City of the Branch would then be *neser/eth*, or Nazareth! Douglas Sean O'Donnell says it beautifully: “So, Matthew is saying that Jesus came from the city of David (Bethlehem) as well as from the people of David (Nazareth). Jesus is ‘the branch.’ Jesus is ‘the Son of David.’ The fact that he grew up in Nazareth as a Nazarene puts an exclamation point on this!”

This is another of the patterned fulfillments we see in the New Testament. Read Matthew 2:19-23 as if you were a Jewish person. Matthew's statement in verse 23 would have been like a lightbulb coming on in the mind of a first-century Jew. Even the place where Jesus lived after returning from Egypt had significance! Nazareth brought hope fulfilled! God shows his hand in every detail surrounding the birth of Jesus, to cause us to rejoice in his wonderful plan!

Saturday, December 10

***“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”
(Matthew 2:10)***

Let's think again about the Wise Men, the Magi, one more time as we end this week. Consider why they made the journey and followed the star.

These Wise Men who went to Bethlehem studied the stars and interpreted dreams as their calling. Why do you think they studied stars and interpreted dreams? I believe they were searching for meaning in their lives beyond themselves. They were looking for a greater purpose in the world that transcended their daily lives. They were seeking the one who gives purpose and joy to life, the one who controls all of life.

In their searching they discovered a promise, written in the stars and written in God's Word, about the promised king. Their greatest joy was to seek out the answer to this promise and find the promised one. The Wise Men were literally fulfilling the parable of Jesus in Matthew 13:44, *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”*

Each of us are like the Wise Men, whether we realize it or not. We are searching for a treasure of great price. What difference does it make in your life that you have found the treasure of Jesus?

One of my favorite artists, Steven Curtis Chapman, wrote a song entitled, The Treasure of Jesus. Meditate on some of the words to this song and let them prepare you to worship Jesus on Sunday. “If I can sing, Let my songs be full of his glory. If I can speak, Let my words be full of his grace. And if I should live or die, Let me be found pursuing this prize, The One that alone satisfies, The treasure of Jesus.”

Sunday, December 11

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:7–8)

Who is God? *Elohim* - Strength and Power. He is transcendent, mighty and strong. This name displays His supreme power, sovereignty, and faithfulness in his covenant relationship with us. As we focus on the names of God, this name, *Elohim*, our covenant-keeping God, fits perfectly into our focus on joy.

A covenant is essentially a bond or agreement between God and his people in which he keeps both sides of the agreement. He commits to be our God and keep us as his people, forever, through his strength and power and faithfulness. Two of my favorite verses that highlight this truth are found in Jeremiah 32:40-41.

“I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.”

God's joy is to do us good! Imagine that, just dwell on that truth for a minute. God rejoices and delights in doing you good, with all his heart and soul! He is good enough and strong enough and sovereign enough to do it! His name is power! Dwell on this name of God today. Let God's joy strengthen you through his Spirit.

Monday, December 12

“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” (Luke 1:14)

“We are having a baby!” There aren’t many more joyful announcements! Christmas is all about unexpected babies being born. We are going to contemplate the joy of birth this week, but even more so the joy that comes from the presence of Jesus. This week we will think about God with us as we read the Christmas story in the gospel of Luke.

I have always thought that one of the few good reasons to go to the hospital is to see a baby, newly born. The first baby announced in Luke is not Jesus, but his relative, John (read Luke 1:5-14). As Zechariah served in the temple, he received news of his baby, who would unexpectedly be born to him and his wife nine months later. Both of them were well advanced in years, and Elizabeth was barren.

Fear gripped Zechariah when he saw the angel. You know what else gripped him? Doubt. As you read verses 18-20 you will see that Zechariah did not believe these amazing, joyful words given to him by God. Maybe he thought, *‘we are too old. There is no way we could have a baby.’* Or perhaps he thought, *‘people will think I am crazy if I tell them this news. I need proof.’* Whatever he was thinking, the angel knew Zechariah didn’t believe.

God promised Zechariah joy and gladness, and he didn’t believe it. Do you ever have that problem? I know I sometimes doubt the goodness of God. I presume that nothing good could come from a situation or circumstance. Or I doubt that God could turn a bad situation around for good. Maybe you do as well. Use this week as an opportunity to allow God to work in an area of doubt or fear in your life.

Tuesday, December 13

“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” (Luke 1:14)

The promise of joy from the angel to Zechariah included others in addition to Zechariah. We also experience joy because of the birth and ministry of John. What joy did John bring as the forerunner for the Messiah, Jesus, and how did he bring joy?

First, notice that John was a joy-bringer because of the work of God in his life. John would be great before the Lord, used mightily by God. Even before his birth, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, set apart by God in a miraculous way. His heart was given over to God in obedience, doing whatever God wanted him to do. John brought joy because God worked in and through him.

Next, observe how John turned people to God and the hearts of fathers to their children. We can assume that those actions bring joy to the lives of people who believed. When our hearts turn toward God and away from other things, joy comes. When fathers turn their hearts toward their children, because God is working, joy comes.

After John's death, Jesus described him like this, *“He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light”* (John 5:35). The light of God that burned through John brought rejoicing to others. That challenges me, and I hope it challenges you. Is it our desire to influence others with God's joy, causing us to live in radical obedience to God? John's witness tells us that a life lived in that way will bring joy to others.

Wednesday, December 14

***“For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears,
the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” (Luke 1:44)***

*Framed in light,
Mary sings through the doorway.
Elizabeth’s six month joy
jumps, a palpable greeting,
a hidden first encounter
between son and Son. (Luci Shaw)*

When Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit was already working in the unborn baby John. As you read Luke 1:39-45 today, think about the joy that this baby experienced. Why did he respond in this way? John, the child still in the womb, recognized that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Consider what this means. When the Holy Spirit works in us, as the Spirit did in John before his birth, we will respond with joy to Jesus. Our joy will begin when we come to know Jesus for the first time, and that joy will only increase as we experience life with Jesus and love him more. This does not mean life will always be happy and pleasant. Joy doesn’t equate with circumstantial happiness, but it does mean that we can rejoice always.

Today, notice the little instances of joy that God gives you. Be aware of the yearning in your heart for something more than this world offers, for a fuller joy than you experience partially now. Thank God for blessing you with a spirit of joy.

Thursday, December 15

***“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” (Luke 1:46–47)***

What is the first Christmas Carol? I think it is right here in Luke 1:46-55. When Mary broke forth into song, she sang about what God would do on that first Christmas. We get a glimpse into the heart of the mother of Jesus, and into what the Bible tells us about the Messiah. Let’s think about it today and tomorrow.

Consider that Mary was a very young teenager, maybe thirteen years old, when she was told that she would bear Jesus. The maturity of her insight into God’s plan amazes me, especially for a person so young. Mary did have at least one example – Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2. Hannah’s son Samuel would be great before the Lord, helping to usher in a new era for the people of Israel by being the forerunner who prepared the way for King David. Hannah, a humble servant of God, was used in a mighty way and she exulted in God for his goodness, as he provided for her a son who would be a priest before God.

Mary’s son would also be a priest and king before God. Mary took cues from this godly woman who went before her and exalted God for choosing to look upon her humble place in life. Take a moment to notice what she sings about in her song, and what she doesn’t mention. Mary’s song doesn’t focus on herself, rather she rejoices in God’s greatness and plan for his people. What can we learn from Mary and how she chooses to rejoice as you prepare your heart to worship Jesus with joy?

Friday, December 16

***“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” (Luke 1:46–47)***

Mary broke into a song of worship! As she thought about who she was, who was in her womb, and what he would accomplish, she couldn't help but praise God in song! As I thought about this truth, I had to ask myself: Does my soul magnify the Lord, and does my spirit rejoice in God my Savior today?

It's nine days until Christmas. That could mean many different things. It may be a stressful time, with plans filling your calendar and tasks to be accomplished. Our economic outlook might make this a difficult time for you. The holidays bring joy, sorrow or a mixed bag of emotions for you and me. There is no one-size-fits-all Christmas season. We all experience a joy that yearns for something more.

How does Mary's song interact with the Christmas that you are anticipating? Notice that Mary's song doesn't seem to address her circumstances. “Mary did not dwell on her happy [or difficult] circumstances but rejoiced in the being and character of God” (Phillip Ryken). Instead, Mary focused on how great and good God is. She did nothing to earn or deserve this blessing, and she wanted to exalt God for his greatness.

Read through the song again. Take time to apply it to your own life. What great things is God doing in your life? How is he showing you his mercy and his provision? Praise him for these things today.

Saturday, December 17

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’” (Luke 2:10)

This week our focus has been on the presence of Jesus with us. In our passage today the angels announce the news of his birth – Jesus came to be with his people!

It's good news! The word for good news found in this passage is the word from which we get our word evangelism, which means to proclaim the good news! God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. He literally became “God with us.” Jesus fulfilled verses like Isaiah 61:1, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

This news brings great joy! As you read Matthew 1:18-25 you will see this joy from the perspective of Joseph. In Luke 2:10, we see the joy the angels experienced in sharing this news. The gospel and joy always go together, because the gospel brings joy!

This is good news of great joy for all people! We need help, and the good news is that God has provided the helper, the Savior. Jesus makes us brand new! *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Think about these truths and use them to prepare your heart to worship Jesus tomorrow.

Sunday, December 18

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.” (Genesis 17:1)

As we continue our Names of God series, today we will see God is *El-Shaddai, God Almighty*, the God who is all-sufficient and all-bountiful, the source of all blessings, who is always with his people.

God first shared this name with Abraham when he promised to bless him and multiply his descendants so that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 17). Abraham passed this name on to his son of the promise, Isaac. Abraham blessed his son Isaac with this name, *“God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples”* (Genesis 28:3).

Continuing to hand the name down throughout the generations, Isaac’s son, Jacob, blessed his son Joseph with this name in Genesis 49:25, as we will learn in today’s sermon. God Almighty was such a significant name to their family that they passed down the testimony of God’s powerful work to their children and grandchildren. Just as Psalm 78 says in verses 4 and 7, they told of God’s great deeds so others might find hope in God.

Part of the joy we can share at Christmas is the blessing of God’s name, as we give it to others. God is all-sufficient and bountifully gives to us, meeting our greatest need through his own son, Jesus. Pray about how you can be a blessing to others this week. Ask God to use you to display his nature as *El-Shaddai* – the source of blessings - to others.

Monday, December 19

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” (1 Peter 1:8)

We have now spent three weeks thinking about joy. During the first week, we learned what joy is. Joy is a gift from God! It doesn't depend on our circumstances. Joy is a deep and abiding affection that only comes from loving God and believing in him. It is a response to the truth that affects our minds, will, and emotions. Joy is the fuel of the Christian life, the wind in our sails.

In the second week, we learned that joy is hope fulfilled and hope anticipated. Joy is an anticipation of the fulfillment of promises in and through Jesus. It can be experienced as a yearning for something we deeply long for but don't fully have yet. Last week we saw that the fulfillment of those promises is God with us, the presence of Jesus in this world and in our lives, through his Holy Spirit. The presence of Jesus meets the deep longing of the human heart.

If joy is central to our relationship with God, how do we make that joy a greater part of our experiences as followers of God? If joy comes from God, then it must be part of the relationships in the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like good, joyful friends whose joy rubs off on you, we also can grow in joy by spending time with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As we begin this week remember this truth, God sees you. He wants to look on you to bless and be gracious to you. He wants to give you the joy of his presence! As this blessing from the Old Testament states,
*“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”*
(Numbers 6:24–26)

Tuesday, December 20

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11)

This is not a passage that we would typically focus on during the advent season, but we should, because it helps us understand how to grow in joy through Jesus. In John 15:1-16, Jesus is spending his final moments with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. His hope for his followers is that we would have the same spiritual intimacy that Jesus has with the Father. This happens through the Christian's union with Jesus.

Jesus spoke these things to his disciples (and us) for their joy. The joy didn't start with the disciples, though, it was first Jesus' own joy. Think about this: Jesus, God with us, came to this world to live among us and die for us. That was his calling. Now, at the end of his life and mission, he was filled with joy, because he was accomplishing his mission. As the Son of God, Jesus must have had perfect joy. Now, in the end, his desire was for his followers to have his full and complete joy.

This joy of spiritual intimacy between Jesus and me is, in some ways, parallel to the joy found between the Father and the Son. My joy comes from loving the Son by keeping his commands (John 15:9-10). His commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:1-5), because Jesus' "yoke is easy and his burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

If you are struggling with joy, you may also be struggling with obedience. Trust God's forgiveness and move forward in faith. Just as David prayed in Psalm 51:12, God will restore to you the joy of his salvation.

Wednesday, December 24

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:9–11)

Jesus, in John 15:1-8, gives us an illustration for our spiritual intimacy with him: the vine and the branches. How does abiding actually work out in practice? Look at verses 1-8.

We learned in week one of our devotional, from 1 Peter 1:8, that love for God brings joy. We love God because he first loved us, and we grow in joy as we grow to love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit increasingly more. We also examined how God’s light shining on us will help us see God (2 Corinthians 4:6). In the verses above, we see that obedience meshes together with love and joy.

The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves us. The Son obeys the Father and abides in the Father’s love through obedience. You and I abide in the love of the Father and the Son through obedience to the Son. Our obedience is confirmed by joy, this gift of delight that the Son gives us, confirming this good, proper and right way to live. Abiding in God is characterized by love and obedience and joy, the confirmation of love.

God is not some cosmic taskmaster, he is *for* us! Jesus knows that living in this world is excruciatingly difficult because he lived among humanity for 33 years. He loves us and wants to sustain us in this life. The only way for us to live in victory is to abide in close, spiritual intimacy with him. When we do, he promises joy forever: a deep affection and yearning for fulfillment with him. God loves you!

Thursday, December 22

“Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:24)

As we continue to think about spiritual intimacy with Jesus, let's look at Jesus' last instructions to his followers. How do these teachings help us grow in our joy in God? They help us to know what our relationship with Jesus is all about. Today, Jesus tells us very simply, *“Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”*

In John 16:16-24, Jesus comforts his disciples in their concern that they will no longer see Jesus. They are worried, and Jesus understands. He tells them they will be sorrowful, but their sorrow will turn to joy (at his resurrection). At that time, their joy will not be taken away. Just as a mother is in anguish before her baby is born, so she rejoices at the child's birth. Their joy would be the same at Jesus' resurrection. It will continue, and our joy will continue as well, with the knowledge Jesus has risen from the dead.

Jesus instructs, “ask in my name.” He is saying, when believers pray according to my name: my character, my power, and my purposes, then you will receive. Prayer is central to our relationship with God. As we spend time with God in prayer we get to know him better. As we grow, our prayers become more aligned with God's will. We come to know God better, love God deeper, and understand more clearly what he desires. We increase in displaying love, obedience, and joy, and the joy overflows to those around us when we ask and receive.

Jesus came to earth to be *“God with us,”* and to show us we could talk with him. As we prepare to celebrate his birth this weekend, remember he is still alive, sitting at the right hand of the Father, ready to answer your prayers.

Friday, December 23

“But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.” (John 17:13)

Our spiritual intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit goes both ways. We communicate with God, and he is with us. In John 17 Jesus shows us his love for us. Before his crucifixion, Jesus' last act on our behalf was to pray for us, that we might have his joy fulfilled in us.

Think about it. Hours before Jesus died on the cross, he prayed for you and for me. I would have been praying only for myself! Jesus did pray for himself in the garden, but we also see in these 26 verses that our Savior prayed for his disciples and for all of his followers. This prayer is a teaching prayer. Like John 11:42, he is speaking his prayer in the hearing of his followers to help them remember everything he has been emphasizing in John 14-17 is for their joy and our joy.

Jesus was instructing believers as he prayed to the Father, and we get to listen in on the conversation. We hear the heart of Jesus as he talks to his Father. We see his care and love for us and the reason he came to earth as a baby boy – so that we may have his joy fulfilled in us. That is good news of great joy!

This takes us right back to 1 Peter 1:8, which are words for us today, *“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”* God has given us that glory through Jesus. *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”* (2 Corinthians 4:6).

My prayer for you as you celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, is that you will find reason to rejoice in your love for Jesus. I pray that you will believe in what Jesus did for you and rejoice with a joy that you cannot express and a joy that is filled with the glory of God!

Saturday, December 24

“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” (Matthew 1:21–23)

One of my favorite phrases and concepts in the New Testament is Immanuel – God with us. God’s promise to be with his people, to be their God, is as old as Genesis, and will stretch to the end of time, as we will see in Revelation. In fact, this promise is at the heart of all that God wants to do, and we see glimpses throughout the Bible.

God’s presence with his people began in the garden when God had close fellowship with Adam and Eve. That fellowship was broken by sin, so God established a covenant with his people. The heart of the covenant in Genesis 17 is that God would be our God, and we would be his people.

The promise of God’s presence continued in the instructions for the tabernacle, when God promised to dwell among his people (Exodus 29:45). God’s presence was one of the blessings of obedience in the giving of the law (Leviticus 26:12).

God’s people sinned against him greatly in the time of the prophets, so God withdrew his presence from his people, as illustrated in Ezekiel 11. Through the prophets, God looks forward to the future when his dwelling place would be restored among his people (Ezekiel 37:27-28; Zechariah 2:10).

Paul understood that through the Holy Spirit, God could now dwell with his church corporately, and in believers individually. He quotes Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 37 to communicate that God’s dwelling place is now *with us* personally. He dwells with every believer and the church in a close and intimate way.

The final goal will be our greatest joy - God’s dwelling with man (Revelation 21:3). The coming of Jesus, Immanuel, assures us that God will fulfill his promise. Rejoice in God’s presence with you today, or ask him to be with you now, if you have never humbled yourself before God. May God’s richest blessings of joy be with you this Christmas!



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