

SERMON TITLE- “Advent #3- The Great Book Of Joy”

TEXT- Luke 2:8-12

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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As usual the Christmas season is rolling rapidly along. We are already on the 3rd week of Advent. We began our Advent preaching calendar as we closed off our series on the CoF. It was a fitting transition. Advent is a season of looking forward- it is a season of expectation.

While Christmas was not an early Christian celebration, over the years it did become that and in Ryan’s infamous Christian calendar the season of Advent marked it as the beginning of the Christian year. So it is only fitting that each Advent Sunday should have a theme in keeping with the message of expectation.

Traditionally the meanings are as follows-

1st Advent- Hope. A purple candle.

2nd Advent- Love. A purple candle.

3rd Advent- Joy. A pink candle.

4th Advent- Peace. A purple candle.

We have not deliberately followed these themes but today I thought I would focus on the traditional theme for this, the 3rd Advent.

It never fails but that as I prepare a sermon that something steps off the page and surprises me. This sermon is no exception. Besides learning that purple is the dominant colour of Advent with the exception of the 3rd Advent, I had another surprise.

I always knew that joy is a major theme of the gospels. In fact as I thought about the appropriate text for an Advent sermon on joy, the message of the angels to the shepherds came immediately to mind-

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Luke 2:8-9

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Luke 2:10

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:11-12

There it is- the Gospel is “**good news that will cause great joy for all the people.**” That’s our message- the Good News we have been given to share. I knew that.

But what surprised me was when I looked up the word “joy” in the OT. I thought that I would find that the message of joy would be something with a new twist in the NT. I was surprised to find that this is not the case at all. “Joy” fills the Bible, from the beginning to the end. And as I thought about it the title of today’s sermon came to mind, “The Great Book Of Joy.”

Advent does not introduce a new thing for God’s people but something that was been part of the very fabric of being God’s people- from the very beginning.

Well, not quite from the beginning in the sense that the first part of the Bible deals with the sadness of the Fall. Clearly there is joy in the story of creation but that story quickly crashes.

However, from that point on a message of joy begins to infuse the Scriptures. Of course one expects to find joy in the Psalms but it is all over the place- even in the Books of Moses as the Israelites are wandering through the desert.

Even there, God gives them feasts and celebrations so that they will experience joy.

From beginning to end, the Bible is “The Great Book Of Joy.”

We probably should begin with a bit of a definition. What is “joy”? It is always good to start with a dictionary. So here is a dictionary definition-

joy- noun

1. feelings of great happiness or pleasure, especially of an elevated or spiritual kind

2. a pleasurable aspect of something, or something that is seen as a source of happiness

So we find that “joy” is a feeling and a feeling that is linked to “happiness.” This is one of the primary things that human beings are on a quest for. In fact the US Declaration of Independence famously enshrines the pursuit of happiness as a right.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The framers of that document concluded that happiness/joy are as basic as life and liberty.

But what does this mean? Benjamin Franklin, who was one of those US founders had quite a bit to say about happiness and joy. For example-

Wine is constant proof that God loves us and loves to see us happy. Benjamin Franklin

While this quote is designed to be clever and provocative it also does strike at an important aspect of joy/happiness. That point is- happiness/joy alone is not the end of the story. If it were, according to this idea alone, the alcoholic who never needs to sober up would be the epitome of happiness. We all know that there is something seriously wrong with that picture even those who might be living by that principle.

So what can we add to that definition that helps us understand “joy” from a Biblical perspective?

First, recently I have listened to a couple of CS Lewis books and from those have appreciated an idea that infuses his writing. That creation has “reflections” of God throughout it. This means that even in the joy of alcohol is a reflection of something God wanted to bless humanity with. This is seen in Jesus’ making of wine of the wedding banquet and verses like-

Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. Psalm 4:7

According to Lewis, however, this adds to the danger of things like this since it means that God’s true joy can be counterfeited by various substances.

The bottom line, however is that those “joys” that we most quickly identify are a reflection of God’s joy.

Secondly, these joys are a dim reflection of something far deeper and more profound. In our first Advent sermon we looked at “hope” and one of the lessons was that between a generic understanding of “hope” that we use in daily speech and Biblical hope- there is a big gap. Biblical “hope” and Biblical “joy” are divine

gifts from God that are far deeper and richer than the way we use those words in the regular course of conversations.

The “joy of the Lord” is something rich and deep and it leads to an important thing we need to understand about Biblical joy-

#1. Joy Is A Gift From God To His People

This is very Good News. It is the opening statement of the angel’s Advent song.

It is also at the very core of what it means to be a kingdom person. In the famous passage of the fruit of the spirit it says-

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

Right there in the first 3 we have 3 of the Advent themes and if we took the liberty of linking forbearance/patience to hope- we would have all 4.

That of course is not important but it does illustrate that joy like the rest of the fruit of the Spirit are not options that are added to the Christian life- they are at the very core of God’s gifts to us.

So what does that mean? Joy is a gift that God wants to give to His people. It is something that is to grow like fruit out of the very nature of being people born of the Spirit. It is, in that sense a “gift” from God to his people.

What else does that mean? To me it indicates that the normal way of understanding the “pursuit of happiness” might send us in the wrong direction.

What is the difference? Let me illustrate it like this. If happiness is something we need to try to achieve, like good health for example, then we are best to get on a program that helps us to that end.

We might, for example, watch our diet, exercise and avoid unhealthy things like smoking. These make very good sense and I would encourage everyone to that end.

Of course there is much about good health that is beyond our control but in the normal sense of the word, good health is not a gift. Good health is a condition that we can aggravate or improve.

If joy is like that, and to some extent it is, then there are things we can do that will make us more or less joyful.

But if Biblical joy is also a gift, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, then it has aspects that are not limited to working at it.

If for example, you have a gift for someone, what can they do to ensure they receive it?

I think that the answer is now quite narrow. If you have a gift for someone they can be in a position to receive it and having been given it- accept it.

Now I suspect that one of the aspects of joy, as a gift from God, that makes it a challenge is that-

#2. Joy Transcends Circumstances

This is one of the big real differences between joy/happiness as it is understood in regular language and joy/happiness as a gift from God.

Normal joy is linked to how joyful your circumstances are. There is no joy in sickness, pain and suffering generally. In fact one of the reasons that people look for joy in alcohol is that there is some form of pain in their lives.

But it is not just alcohol and drugs that people use to find joy. I find joy in fishing. When I have the chance to think about and plan a fishing trip, I can lay awake at night filled with great joy at what that day of fishing will look like.

If I need a pick-me-up and have the opportunity to plan a fishing trip, this alone can do the trick very nicely.

The problem is, there are some things in life that aren't solved by planning a fishing trip. In fact there are times, that I'm sure we all have experienced when worries and pain fill our thoughts at night, as we lie awake.

That in the normal way of looking at joy is what defines joy.

But this is not Biblical joy. Biblical joy reveals itself for what it is when it rises above the circumstances. It is why joy is placed in what are surely odd contexts

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds James 1:2

What is the basis of that kind of joy? It is because it is part of a package that has at least 2 parts-

- i. hope that the pain of the moment is not the last word.
- ii. a relationship with God

There is probably no verse that captures this as well as-

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, Hebrews 12:1 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2-3 NASB

And there we can begin to understand how joy and challenging times can be go together. The gift of joy is linked to a grand vision that we are part of.

The Book of Hebrews links the joy to the picture of a grand race where the runner reaches for the prize with a crowd cheering them on.

The race of course is not just a race set up for the entertainment of a crowd- but part of the grand mission that we as Kingdom people have been made part of- the mission of bringing the Good News of peace to a world full of conflict and pain- the mission is what the angels were announcing.

But what is the prize? The prize for the runner is joy- and for that prize the runner stretches forward with renewed energy. The joy is the garland set before the runner.

But this prize is not limited to a future date- the gift of joy is also here right here and right now and the joy that we taste now reminds us that there is more to come.

And this leads to the last aspect of joy that we will look at today.

#3. Joy Is Something We Can And Should Seek

Life is not always joyful. While James and Paul speak of joy while facing trouble. At the very least that is a challenge. Once a season of trouble is past we can look back and be thankful for how we have arrived on the other side but actual joy in the middle of it all? I don't know anyone who speaks easily about joy in the face of trouble. The best that I can come up with from verses like this is the reminder that just giving in to the despair of troubles is not an option- that there is a place for joy in the hardest times we face. That

certainly is the context of the joy that Jesus had before Him and He “endured the cross.”

The reminder of what Jesus suffered has for 2000 years been a source of comfort to countless people going through terrible trials.

This is an aspect of joy that we are pressed to be active in seeking.

But there is another side to the promise of joy. There are times when we find ourselves pushing our way through life as if we are dragging a ball and chain. I remember a book by Cathrine Marshall. She had been a very successful author writing a Christian blockbuster called, A Man Called Peter, about her husband.

But somewhere in her life- as a successful Christian writer she felt something was missing. It was joy. She wrote a book about her journey through this- and it was a book that I still remember and think about when I go through seasons when it seems that joy is in short supply.

The book she wrote was called, Something More. And it describes her quest to that gift of joy.

Frankly I don't remember much about the book, except this, coming to a realization in my own life- that joy is a gift from God, that we are right to pursue. This is a gift from God that we can ask for.

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Luke 11: 9-10

That is quite a challenge that Jesus gives His followers. We are to ask- but not just ask, we are to persist in our asking. There are things which we are to pursue. And in the Luke version Jesus adds this explanation to it.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luke 11:11-13

God like the best of fathers want to give good things to His children.

And there is a lesson that I took forward from Catherine Marshall's story. We are to ask with persistence but how much more should we persist in asking for those treasures of His that He has told us are of the fruit of the Spirit.

I truly believe that joy, is one of those treasures that we are to pursue with the doggedness of the, ask, seek, knock instruction.

Today is the 3rd Advent- the Advent of joy. It is deeply part of the Christmas season and announced by the angels- joy to the world!

I trust that today, as you leave this service you will go from here- hearing that announcement, believing that announcement and seeking the joy that the angels announced.