

Really, Truly, Joyful

Philippians 1-4

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Hope, and peace, and joy, and love. Those are the four candles of these Sundays leading up to Advent. But more than that, they are the message that Christ brings. And then that fifth candle is the Christ candle. It will be lit on the Christmas Eve service. I hope that you are making plans to be here for that wonderful time of worship as well.

So yes, this morning is joy. What do you think of when you think of Christmas joy? An image that might come to mind for a lot of us is a child, I'm going to say somewhere between 3 and 6 years old, sitting with a pile of torn-up wrapping paper around, having just opened up that gift, that toy, that was that child's heart's desire for months leading up to Christmas. For somebody else, maybe it's when all those favorite movies start showing again and help to set the atmosphere for the Christmas season. For somebody else, Christmas joy might refer to a little something that was added to the eggnog to lighten the season a little bit.

What is joy? We talk about these things, and actually, it's very interesting that even those three examples point to the kind of stuff that we look to to make us happy. Often covering up an underlying unhappiness or longing or searching in our lives. Gifts: maybe if I buy that next thing. Maybe if I buy that new car because, hey, it's coming up for the new year and the last model year is going to be on sale, it's about time to replace it. Maybe that will be the thing that makes me happy. Entertainment to numb the pain, to turn off the mind, to turn off the thoughts. Or turning to addictive behaviors in order to help us to forget about the things that make us unhappy.

Joy is not the same thing as happiness. That's better stated the other way around. Happiness, some sort of temporary euphoria that we can stir up in our hearts or our minds in a particular set of circumstances, is not joy. When the Bible speaks of joy, the image, the beautiful image that it would give us, is that of a deep well that never runs dry. That you can draw upon even in the desert, even in the middle of the drought, completely independent of the circumstances, because joy is deep and abiding and always in abundant supply.

A. The Joy Announced by Angels

1. Shepherds in the fields

The angels announced joy to the shepherds. We already read those verses. We'll read them again a little bit later. Last week, Pastor Danny did a fabulous job reminding us of the situation of those shepherds who were sitting out in those fields that night when the angels appeared to them. Remember the images of people who were at the very lowest end of social status or stature. People who would be looked down upon by everyone: despised, turned away from, people who were looked upon often as being dishonest. Perhaps they were thieves. People who were unclean, literally because of the nature of their work, and often looked upon religiously as unclean.

So shepherds out in the fields, living in the midst of social stigma at the bottom of the ladder. Have you ever felt like "Nobody likes me, nobody wants to be around me. I don't have anyone." That's the shepherds. All they had was each other. Their economic situation was desperate. They were the poorest of the poor and they lived in a land that was the poorest of the poor. Israel was a backwater in the Roman Empire. The wealth, the power, everything was elsewhere. In this land, everybody lived--or just about everybody--on subsistence level, living in the middle of economic depression and political oppression.

Pastor Danny talked about that as well. The Roman Empire ruled the world, and they ruled with an iron fist. Israel had been crushed. The people of the land lived under the foot of their enemies. They had been longing and waiting for someone to come and free them from Roman rule, deliver them from oppression, and through the centuries they kept longing and waiting. And they lived in a time of dry, often empty, religiosity. It had been 400 years since a word was received from the Lord. 400 years where the faithful few were clinging to the promises, and longing. But where, for many, this was simply a ritual, a system of rules. Nothing that brought inner peace, as we talked about.

2. Good news of great joy

So that's those shepherds in the fields. And then suddenly they have this angel appear to them who brings them good news of great joy. Luke 2:10: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'" Not just the 1%, not just those who happen to be in the inner circles and will have early access. Great joy for all people. But what does that mean for those shepherds sitting in that field? Does that mean finally freedom from political oppression? Justice will finally be established in the way that I have imagined it should be established? Does it mean a lifting of the economic circumstances so that these people who lived literally in desperation would finally have their needs provided for them? Does it mean that that finally there wouldn't be the social stigma that they carried with them, and the stratification of society, where they always seemed pushed down with nobody on their side? Does it mean that finally there would be an end to empty, dry religiosity, and there would be real spiritual life?

3. Salvation, and restoration to come

Well, the angels went on to explain, the good news of great joy is that a Savior is born to you. The long-awaited Messiah, the One who is the Lord. The One who is born was coming to be a Savior from sin. You know the story, but may we never weary of repeating it. Jesus is God, the second Person of the eternal Trinity. He willingly set aside the glories of heaven in order to be born in weak human flesh. To walk this earth, to struggle as we struggled, to experience pain as we experienced pain. To fulfill all the righteousness that we can never fulfill. To do all of the things that we know we ought to do and somehow never manage to accomplish.

And then, being completely righteous, to go to a cross of condemnation in our place. Taking upon Himself our sin, bearing upon Himself the wrath of God poured out against sin. Absorbing all of the punishment that you and I and everyone else deserves, so that everyone who believes in Him can be saved. And so that we have the hope--we've already talked about it--of restoration. Not simply of eternal life, but of restoration of our relationship with God, of restoration of all of the wrongs being made right. This is the good news of great joy that Jesus came to bring to all people. That is what Christmas is about.

The question that one might ask, is what difference did it make for those shepherds in that day? Or even in the decades to come? They still lived in poverty. They still existed under the heel of Roman oppression. They were still on the very lowest level of the social ladder, and they were still surrounded by a religious culture that was empty and dry. So where's the joy? The joy, of course, is in the Savior. It does make a difference. And for the rest of the sermon, I want to actually give an extended example of one man who knew the joyful difference that Christ brings into our lives, independent of all of these other factors. And that's the example of Paul as he describes joy to us in the book of Philippians.

B. The Joy Christ Brings

The book of Philippians is all about the joy that Christ brings. In those four short chapters, the word joy or rejoicing, or some reference to it, appears somewhere between 16 and 20 different times. He's constantly calling us, the readers, back to the concept of joy. He wants to proclaim joy in Jesus Christ. He wants to preserve our joy in Christ, in the midst of all kinds of things that can go on in our lives.

1. Joy in hard times

The first thing we see is that that man is able to experience joy in the most difficult of times, joy in hard times. This is something that we need to hear. Our circumstances can be difficult, times can be hard. This is a season where everybody's talking about lights and laughter. But there's also loss. There's also fear, or worry. There are going to be some who here don't come back to work after Christmas vacation. There are going to be others whose Christmas season is filled with both grief and joy. There will be social circumstances in which someone feels left out, looked down upon, or excluded.

We have hard times, and Paul wants us to know that he has joy in the midst of difficult circumstances and we can too. What are his circumstances? As Paul is writing this letter, he is sitting in a prison in Rome, waiting for a trial in which his life will be on the line. He has been deprived of the most basic of human freedoms, and that is freedom itself. He has been falsely accused and he is going to stand trial. And literally his life, his physical life, will be in the hands of a capricious judge. Besides that, he has enemies who are working against him, enemies who are seeking to negate the good things that he has done, enemies who want to and long to see his downfall and are standing against him. So those are Paul's circumstances. They're pretty rough. You wouldn't say, "Hey, Merry Christmas, Paul." You might say, "Man, how are you doing?"

--the people God gives you

And what Paul has to say is that he's filled with joy. There are three things that give him joy in these circumstances. And the first one is the people that God gives him. The first thing that can give us joy in difficult circumstances is the people who God gives us. Philippians 1:4-5: "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now," These aren't just acquaintances. These aren't just people who happened to hear about him and feel sorry for him. These are partners. These are people who are shoulder to shoulder with him for the same purpose, in the same cause. They are people who encourage and support him and for whom he prays.

Do you get the idea of a church family? Get the idea of, in the midst of difficult circumstances, being able to look and see people who love you and care about you and build into your life? One of the things that can bring joy in the most difficult circumstances is the people God has given you. In this place, in other fellowship circles, those who are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, who will be with you in the most difficult of circumstances. And that is only because of Jesus. He is the One who made this family. He is the One who made the church.

--the work God is doing

The second thing that brings Paul joy in these difficult circumstances is the work that God is doing. He's in a tough time, but he knows that God is at work. Philippians 1:18-19: "...Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." The circumstances are difficult, but God is doing His work and I can trust Him to continue to do His work.

--the certainty of God's purposes

And then the last one, the certainty of God's purposes. Philippians 1:25: "Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith." Brothers and sisters, nobody is promising you that this Christmas is going to be happy all the time. But because of Jesus Christ, no matter what the circumstances, this Christmas can be joyful. He has surrounded you with people who love you. He is doing His work in and through you, and He will--we can speak with great confidence--accomplish His purposes. There are still going to be hard times. For the shepherds, for the disciples, the Apostle Paul, for you, for me. But Jesus makes the difference. That's good news of great joy for all people.

2. Joy in relationships

The second thing that Paul has to talk about is joy in the midst of relationships. Tough relationships. Boy, this is the time of the year for tough relationships. It starts with Thanksgiving; it goes through Christmas. You have to hang around with those people who most of the year you would rather just forget about, right? And you have to interact, and you have to interact joyfully. "Happy to see you, give me a hug!" Whatever it might be. Relationships can be rough. Relationships can rob us of joy.

And Paul writes to the church, a church that brings him great joy, about the dangers of selfish ambition and vain conceit and self-interest. Aren't those the things that fill those conversations that make things so awkward this time of year? But then he says to them, you can have joy in your relationships. Philippians 2:2: "...make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." That kind of love does not come naturally to us. But that is what we are called to. And that's what Christmas calls us to. Christmas calls us to like-mindedness, unity and interest in others that flows out of the love of Jesus Christ. And so, sitting down for that meal with a deep breath and a focus on Christ, saying, "Jesus, let Your love flow through me." To speak words filled with care for others. To speak words that are interested in their well-being. To speak words that foster love at this table.

--loving others

And Paul tells us that the way that we can have that love is to follow the example of Jesus Christ. He continues in Philippians 2:4-, “Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another....” Sitting at that table, about to have that meal with that dreaded person... “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” And then he breaks into that hymn that we know and love: Jesus Christ, Who being in very nature God, with all the rights and privileges and glory due His name. Jesus Christ, Who being in very nature God, did not consider that equality with God something to be held onto desperately, but rather emptied Himself of it, made Himself nothing, humbled Himself into the form of a servant. And being found in human likeness, humbled Himself even further to the point of death, death on a cross.

That's the attitude. The whole purpose of that hymn in the structure of that passage, is to be an example of the attitude that you and I can have towards other people. Emptying ourselves of those things that we think we deserve and want to hold on to, humbling ourselves to serve those who are difficult. Sacrificing ourselves for their good, looking to the interests of others. There is no way. There is no way that a human being in their own power is ever going to be able to act like that. That is good news of great joy for all people, because Christ is born and He can make a difference in our lives.

3. Joy when we're battling ourselves

Paul goes on to talk about joy when we are battling within our self, joy when we're battling within our self. Philippians 3:1: “Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.” Well, a safeguard against what? A safeguard against rejoicing in something other than the Lord. Paul is about to break into a paragraph in which he talks about people who place more value in the flesh than they do in Jesus.

--joyless striving

What that means is they place more value in their pedigree, more value in how they appear and how others think about them. More value in what they actually do to fulfill the requirements of the law than what they place in what Jesus Christ has done on their behalf. And he's warning them, don't rejoice in those things. Rejoice in the Lord. That's good news for us, because joy overcomes a cycle of striving and of defeat and condemnation that comes when we compare ourselves to a law that we can never fulfill or when we compare ourselves to others.

Do we ever get caught in that battle? “If only I could do better. If only I could do more, I would feel better about myself and others would feel better about me. “Or the other way

around, “Man, look at me. I am crushing it!” Paul says none of those things matter. The only thing that matters is knowing Jesus. And so the joy of knowing Jesus helps us to overcome that vicious cycle of inner striving, battling against ourselves and our flesh to try and be better, to try and find something in ourselves that we can rejoice in. He goes on in Philippians 3:8, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for Whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.”

The two keys to having joy when we're fighting that inner battle. One, consider everything else garbage. Not everyone else. Everything else. All of the things that we look to to give us value. All of those things that we measure ourselves against. The expression here that Paul uses is actually a pretty awkward expression. If I used his language, I might be censored or at least bleeped on the live stream because he doesn't say garbage and he doesn't say trash. “I consider them to be worse than trash. I consider them to be sewage. All of those things that I strive for to make myself look good to myself or to others.” It doesn't count for anything. What does count is knowing Jesus Christ.

And so here we have it again. Christmas joy comes because of Jesus. And when we know Christ, nothing else matters anymore. Because in Him we finally have that answer to “Who am I?” Well, on my own there's not much there. Ahh, but in Him a son or a daughter of the King, a brother of Jesus Christ. One who has been exalted already in Christ into the heavenlies, far above all rule and power, far above every struggle, far above every striving. Already glorified in God's eyes, because of who I am in Jesus Christ.

4. Joy when we're battling worry

So rejoice in the Lord this Christmas season. He goes on the next one, chapter four, joy when we're battling worry. Actually repeating the same words in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Brothers and sisters, I can testify to you personally. Nothing kills joy like worry. And Paul has the answer for us here. The short answer is that it is Jesus Christ.

--the Lord is near

His very next words are “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” Do not be anxious. The Lord is near. That's Emmanuel, God with us. Christmas brings us joy in place of worry and anxiety because Emmanuel, because Jesus is with us, because the Lord is near. We're actually going to have a whole sermon on this section of chapter four in the first week of January about personal peace, as Paul describes it in three different ways in this chapter. But for right now, rejoice in the Lord because He is near. You do not have to be

happy about what's going on in your life right now, but keep your mind and your heart on the Lord who is near, and He will give joy.

5. Joy when we're battling discontentment

And then the last one, joy when we are battling discontentment. We've all had the experience, or many of us have. The thing that we longed for actually wasn't under the tree, but our best friend got it. Or the thing that we thought--oh boy, I've had this one. The thing that we thought our spouse wanted wasn't the thing that they wanted. And then, of course, extend that into the rest of our lives. And so often, not only for shepherds who have literally nothing and are living out in the fields, but so often for each one of us, we feel like we don't have enough. We feel like something is lacking. Perhaps it's not fair.

Paul writes in Philippians 4:10-13, "I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength."

Paul has literally gone through times where he had nothing to eat, where he was deprived of every possession, shipwrecked, lost everything, floating on pieces of wood in the sea. He has also gone through times when he had to work his fingers until they were bone tired and raw, sewing tents in order to support himself while he carried on his ministry. And he also knew times when people sent gifts that freed him from that burden and enabled him to live in, not the kind of plenty that we think about, not 21st century American plenty, but relative plenty. Living without need.

The thing that's amazing is that in every one of those situations, he was able to live with joy. "I rejoice," and the reason that he could rejoice was that everything he needed was given to Him in Jesus Christ. He could trust Christ. He could find his satisfaction in Christ. He didn't need another gift. He didn't need another provision of some sort. He didn't need to fill up emptiness with a 403B or a 401K, or whatever it might be. He needed Christ. "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Christ in us. There we have it again, Emmanuel, Christmas.

--Christ in you is the root of contentment

Christ in us is the root of contentment which produces joy in our lives. There are lots of mentions of joy in the Scriptures. There's actually only a few times that we read the words "great joy." The angels appeared to the shepherds and said, "I bring you good news of great joy." Every time that the words "great joy" appear in the New Testament, it has to do with

Jesus because He's the One Who brings great joy. He's the One Who brings great joy to wise men who have journeyed through deserts and long, cold nights in order to find the King who was born. He's the One Who brings great joy to shepherds who are out there in the field, in those difficult circumstances, when angels appear to them and say, "I bring you good news of great joy."

He's the One Who brings great joy 30 years later, 33 years later, to those who see Him at His resurrection and witness His ascension into glory, because He is going to establish His kingdom and restore all things. He brings great joy. And He brings great joy in the book of Acts as the good news of Christ spreads, bringing salvation to all people. Jesus Christ is our joy. And so before going back to those original examples, before we try to find happiness this season in one more gift or in some sort of mind-numbing entertainment. Before we seek a temporary reprieve from pressures or stress or pains in drink or some other addiction, let's look to Emmanuel. Let's draw deeply from the well of joy. Every single joy-robbing circumstance and spiritual struggle of the shepherds, of the apostle Paul, of me or of you. Every single joy-robbing circumstance and spiritual struggle is overcome in Christ. Receive Him and choose His joy this season. Let's pray.

Jesus, You are our joy. Nothing else. Nothing else can fill the emptiness inside. We try. I've tried. Nothing else can give us meaning or significance. Nothing else can enable us to overcome. Nothing else can cover over grief. Nothing else can give us true and certain hope. You are our joy. Thank You that in those long, silent years and in those dark times, You were born into this world. And to this very day, when we feel like it is silent and dark, You are Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus the Savior, Christ the Lord. Father, I pray for my brothers and sisters. For each one, those in this room and those who are listening. That in their point of need at this moment, they would find You to be the joy, the answer. In Your name we pray. Amen.