Rediscovering Christmas: *The Gift of Joy*
Luke 2:8-11; Nehemiah 8:8-12

As we return to our Advent series entitled, “Rediscovering Christmas,” I want to remind you of where we are. We began the series with a focus on finding hope in uncertain times. Last week we heard a compelling message from Pastor Justin Oberndorfer and his bride Sara regarding the peace of Christ in the midst of brokenness. This morning we shall set our sights on the amazing gift of Joy presented to us in the Advent of Christ. Our scripture focus will be Luke 2:8-11 and Nehemiah 8:8-12. Let us read the Word of God together:

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 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. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. 10 Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

My message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Nature of Joy; 2) The Gift of Joy; and 3) Cultivating Joy.

I. The Nature of Joy

Of all the things we might remember of 2020, I suspect the word “Joy” does not come to mind! 2020 has been a year of many things, but joy probably does not make our short list, right? 2020 has been a frustrating year of unwanted change all around the world. The Covid pandemic has disrupted many things that we have taken for granted under normal circumstances, including our ability to go to school and work; to be with extended family members; to go to church and worship without wearing masks; to visit our sick friends and family in the hospital; to host a birthday party; or even to attend a sporting event. 2020 has also been a year of racial and civil unrest; hostile politics; massive unemployment; and a volatile economy. In many respects, 2020 has been a year of lament…and for a growing number of people, 2020 has been a year of loss. So great has been this season of loss and lament that most of us have already forgotten that our beloved Kansas City Chiefs won the Superbowl in 2020! Remember that? Can you believe our joy and celebration on that grand occasion was only 10 months ago…it seems like a lifetime ago when our city rejoiced and celebrated the end of our 30 years of waiting, right?

If ever there was a need for a huge, heaping helping of JOY…it’s now, amen? I think it’s safe to say we all could use a refill of our joy buckets. Church, I have some good news for you! The season of Advent is just what the doctor ordered! In this season of waiting and anticipation, we have the opportunity to remember and reclaim our joy. But before we dig into the gift of Joy presented in Advent, I would like to take a minute to explore the nature of joy.
If you look up the word “joy” in Webster’s dictionary, the definition is this: 1): the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires : DELIGHT. 2): a state of happiness or felicity : BLISS. 3): a source or cause of delight.

I think each part of that definition is important for us to understand this elusive concept of joy.

1) First, joy is an emotion…it is a feeling of happiness and delight. I suspect we can all recall a time when we felt joy…I sure hope so anyways! Even the memories of feeling joy bring light and hope to our weary souls, amen? So…take a moment and recall a time when you felt great joy. Perhaps for some of you, it was when the Chiefs won the Superbowl last year. For many of us, we remember the pure joy of holding our newborn children, or the glorious bliss of our wedding day. The feeling of joy can be attached to great and significant occasions, but sometimes we feel joy in common, every day experiences like tasting great food, seeing a friend who we have not seen for some time, or stepping out on a beautiful, sunny morning. Lots of people try to parse out the feelings of happiness from the feelings of joy, but I think when it comes to the feeling or emotion…happiness and joy are almost indistinguishable. One thing is for certain: whenever we experience true happiness and joy, we all want to experience it again as soon as possible, right? Who would like to be full of joy and happiness 24 hours a day? I suspect we would all wish for more of that feeling. Notice that Webster associates the feeling of joy with “a sense of well-being, success, or good fortune…OR…the prospect of possessing what one desires.” So, we can feel joy in that which is currently happening, or in the prospect of what we feel assured is about to happen. We can feel joy in the already…and in the “not yet.” Keep that part in mind because it is important.

2) Secondly, joy is a state of being. In this sense, joy is not so much a fleeting emotion as it is a new condition. Imagine if you have been battling cancer for 2 years…you have been through the surgery, chemo, and radiation, and now you get a call from the doctor’s office with your most recent test results. If you discover that the tumor has shrunk, you might feel happy. But if you discover that you are now cancer free, you have entered into a state of joy, right? What’s the difference? Your joy is based on a new state of being…a new condition that brings hope and relief…a sense of safety and a new lease on life. That kind of joy is different from an emotion…it is rooted in a significant state of being, and that kind of joy is almost always a product of good news that the old condition is gone and a new condition has come.

3) Finally, Webster defines joy as “a source or cause of delight.” Fishing brings me joy…it is a source or cause of delight. My dog Molly is a joy…she is a source or cause of delight in my life. There are many sources or causes of delight in my life…these things can be considered “joys”, right? If ever someone says to you, “You are a joy to me!”…that is a tremendously high compliment! It means that you are a source or a cause of delight to that person. We all need “joys” in our life, amen? Perhaps you might take a moment and make a mental list of those “joys” in your life. Every source or cause of delight in our lives is an opportunity to give thanks, amen? The “joys” in life cause us to be thankful, and gratitude is a powerful weapon against despair and sadness.

Now I know Webster is not the authority that Christians depend upon…we are biblical people after all. So what does the Bible say about Joy? I spent a great deal of time researching the Hebrew and Greek words for joy this week. I read numerous passages referring to joy as well as any number of biblical articles on the subject of joy, and here’s what I can tell you: Webster and the Bible generally agree on the subject! In other words, as we approach God’s Word, we find
all three definitions of joy presented in the text. We find occasions where people experience joy as an emotion. When Solomon was anointed king over Israel, we read in 1 Kings 1:40, “And all the people went up after him, playing on pipes, and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise.” Now that’s a party! Notice how the Israelites felt great joy in the prospect of having Solomon as their king. It gave them a sense of joy to know their country was being led by a man of great wisdom. It made them feel successful and confident about their future, and their joy led them to celebrate…loudly! This was clearly in a time prior to sound ordinances.

Now, we also see examples of joy as a state of being. Our text this morning is actually a perfect example. In Luke 2 the angels announce, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” The joy referenced here in Luke 2 is not an emotion, it is a new state of being. Israel had been waiting for hundreds, if not thousands of years for the Messiah of God, and that wait is over! The Christ has been born; He has arrived; …it is an indescribable joy because never again will Israel…or the world…be without the good news of a Savior! The Advent of Jesus changes everything…it is a joy that runs deeper than emotion. Jesus introduces a new state of being.

Finally, we see many biblical examples of joy as a source or cause of delight. Like any good pastor, the Apostle Paul has a deep love for his congregation in Philippi, and he writes to them in Philippians 4:1, “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

To the church in Thessalonica, Paul writes (1 Thess. 2:20), “For you are our glory and joy.” Paul’s congregants served as a cause and source of delight, so he refers to them as his “joy.”

Now…that is a brief, and, no doubt inadequate, treatment of the nature of joy. Entire books have been written on this subject, and I get that much more could be said. Nevertheless, as we turn to my second subheading, keep the three definitions of joy close at hand, because all three are important and meaningful as we press on in 2020 and anticipate the transforming power of Advent. Let us now transition to my second subheading…

II. The Gift of Joy

Regardless of whether we are talking about an emotion, a state of being, or a cause for delight…I think that which separates happiness from joy is this simple observation: Joy is always a gift! Joy is always accompanied by a sense of profound gratitude and an awareness that the gift was undeserved.

Think about your experiences of joy throughout your life, and I suspect the common denominator is the awareness of how undeserving and blessed you felt at that moment. I can go right down the list and tell you time and again of occasions when I was overcome with joy…and EVERY single time it was due to this awareness that I was blessed beyond anything I could ever hope for or deserve. My greatest memory of joy was the day I got married to my wife Christy. I will never forget watching her walk down the aisle, realizing to my core that this woman was a gift from God…she was beyond my wildest hopes and dreams…she was my source of JOY, I felt JOY, and our new lives together created a new state of blissful JOY…most of the time! I
remember the joy of holding each of my newborn children…it was an experience of absolute bliss…and again, I was filled with a sense of unworthiness and gratefulness that exceeds expression. From a perfect day on the water, to the taste of great food, to the longstanding loyalty of a good friend…joy is always a gift. And joy always points to the Giver of all good gifts, right?

If you have not done so already, I encourage you to read the autobiography of C. S. Lewis entitled, *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis grew up in England and experienced a devastating loss at an early age when his mother passed away. The trauma of his loss made him increasingly angry at God, to the extent that he claimed to be an atheist. However, as time went on, Lewis was regularly surprised by experiences of Joy that stirred his heart profoundly. Whether it was the beauty of the garden, or the taste of good food, or the company of good friends, Lewis was beset with wonder that Joy would come to him when least expected. Along that journey, Lewis began to define joy in this way: “an unsatisfied desire which itself is more desirable than any other satisfaction” (*Surprised By Joy*, 18). In other words, the joys that we experience…the times of feeling happy, the state of being that brings relief, the sources of delight in our earthly lives…all point to the one true JOY behind all the other joys. Thus, for Lewis, the gifts of joy were not to be looked upon as an end to themselves, but each gift of joy was a means of looking through the gift to the source of the gift…to the One who is Joy…the Giver of all good things. This is the power of Advent.

When Jesus is born into the world, the Giver of all good things blesses sinful human beings with the most precious thing He has to give…His Son. In Jesus, God has given this dark world Himself. In Jesus, we no longer look through the gift to the Giver, for Jesus is both: He is the Gift, and He is the Giver. He is the source of Joy, because He is JOY incarnate! What does that mean? It means that every sunset, every taste of good food, every enduring friendship, every “perfect day” and every bit of good news points to HIM!

Let us go back and revisit our list of past joys. Think about your wedding day. Think about holding your newborn children. Think about that perfect day on the water, your best friend, your anniversary party, your first deer…whatever the occasion that brought such great joy. Now look through the joy…look through the gift of that occasion, that person, that feeling, that success…and what do you see? If you have eyes to see, all the joys of life point to our God and Creator who loves us, and the perfect Gift of His Son…His “only begotten Son,” His JOY…that we might have HIS JOY…and our joy might be complete!

This is exactly what Jesus says in John 15:9-11: “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.”

Joy is always a gift from the One who is Joy…the child born unto us, who is Christ the LORD! This is the good news of Advent. But notice, the news is comprised of an already and a not yet. As we celebrate the birth of Christ, His life, His death, and His resurrection, we know we are already blessed with the Joy of forgiveness, new life in Christ, and the hope of the resurrection. We can feel joy; Christ is our joy; and we have entered into a new state of joy as those who have been adopted as children of God! Here is the profound, Christian joy that surpasses any notion.
of happiness, for happiness is too lowly a term to describe the profound wonder and gift of our salvation in Christ! Yet notice, we are also living in the “not yet.” The Joy of the Lord is ours already, we still live in a dark and painful generation. The fulfillment of our longing for Joy is “not yet,” right? The Bible tells us that the Christ who comes into the world as a gift, humble and meek, lowly in a manger—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world--will come again as the Lion of Judah and our Triumphant King! He will come again and make the wrongs right, and our deep longing for Joy Himself will be satisfied. Thus, our joy is not only that which has been accomplished already, but our joy is exceedingly great at the prospect of getting what we desire! And what do we desire?

Church, what do we truly desire? Oh…we think we desire a great many things…health, comfort, safety, money, sex, pleasure, time, friends, children, success, power, influence, fame…but these things are not the true desire of every human heart. In fact, the more we long for these things, the greater our unhappiness. You see, the true desire of every human heart is JOY…and JOY is a person—His name is Jesus! He is the Giver and the Gift, and soon…very soon…The One called Joy shall return, and we will have what we desire. We will have Christ Himself…we shall have Joy, and Joy shall have us!

Listen: when you exchange gifts this Christmas, remember the point of the gift is to point people to the Giver…and that’s not you or Santa Claus for that matter! Our LORD is the Giver, and the Gift that He gives us is JOY! And not an incomplete joy…but a joy that is FULL. That leads me to my final subheading…

III. Cultivating Joy

As was the case when we looked at hope, the same is true when it comes to joy: how we live, how we think, and the choices we make powerfully influence our access to joy. So, let me conclude with some ideas about how we can cultivate joy in our lives.

1) Return to Joy

A few weeks ago we talked about the new word for 2020: doomscrolling. It’s the regular activity of scrolling through the news headlines or social media and feeling an overwhelming sense of doom! When we feed our minds with bad news, our access to joy feels like a million miles away, right? That was somewhat the case with those in Jerusalem back in the days of Nehemiah.

If you recall, the citizens of Jerusalem were conquered in 587 BC because they were a wicked and idolatrous people. God handed them over to the Babylonians who destroyed the temple, tore down the walls, and carried thousands away into exile. After 70 years, following the Persian conquest of the Babylonians, the citizens of Jerusalem were allowed to return home, only to find their city in shambles. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, they set to work rebuilding the temple and the city wall. Then, in Nehemiah 8, after the wall was finished, all the citizens gathered together and they spent an entire day listening to Ezra read the law of God aloud. The effect of hearing God’s law caused the people to weep. Why? Because they became very aware of their sin and the darkness within them.
Now, as a pastor, it’s generally good to see people weep and lament over their sin. As Paul writes in 2 Cor. 7:10, “Godly sorrow leads to repentance.” However, the point of repentance is to receive forgiveness so that we might return to JOY. On this day, however, Ezra and Nehemiah sense that the people are overwhelmed with sadness. To some extent, listening to the law of God for an entire day was like an ancient form of doomscrolling! It was devastating, and their joy was demolished. So, the spiritual leaders instruct their devastated congregation, saying: This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep. Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our LORD. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

Church, hard times come. Some of those hard times come as a result of our own sin and bad choices. Some hard times come for other reasons. But in the end, here is what is ALWAYS true: This day is holy to the LORD your God! This day and every day is the day the LORD has made, so let us rejoice and be glad in it, amen? That’s exactly what the leaders are saying to this group of people who have been devastated, defeated, and now convicted of their own sinfulness.

Let me translate their message for you in modern language: Get over yourselves…it’s not about you…and be thankful for that! This day and every day is about our LORD and HIS JOY! His joy remains…even when we have been devastated. His joy remains…even when we have been defeated. His joy remains, even when we have been unfaithful. Go eat some good food and enjoy a sweet drink; go gather your families and friends; go enjoy the simple pleasures provided as gifts from the GIVER, and you will come to remember that it is the JOY of the LORD where we find our strength! Return to JOY!

Church, I know you have had a hard year…2020 has been a challenge for us all. But no matter how bad things get, we can always be grateful for our Lord’s gifts, and we can always be generous, right? Christ is with us; God is for us, so whom shall we fear? No matter how bad things get, the sun will shine in the morning, water will quench our thirst, and sleep will ease our minds. If your joy bucket is depleted, set aside the doomscrolling and indulge yourself in the gifts our LORD has already given us to enjoy…so that you might remain thankful and realize that this day, and every day, is holy…set apart…important…and irreplaceable to our LORD. Let us not wish away 2020, or any day that has been granted to us, no matter the circumstances. You may feel weak, but the joy of the LORD is our strength, and His joy remains! Go your way, and return to joy!

2) Obey and Abide

Another means of cultivating joy is found in what we just read in John 15. Jesus teaches his disciples: 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.

Church, if you want your joy bucket full, abide in Christ. That means making a decision to keep His commandments…to devote yourself to pursuing Jesus and honoring Him with your life. That’s what discipleship is all about; but sadly, many of us have made a half-hearted commitment to Christ, and so the doom of our choices, our sin, and our circumstances have all but depleted our joy buckets. Take Jesus to heart when he says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love…my joy will be in you, and your joy will be full.”
Obedience leads to abiding, abiding leads to joy, and joy is the chief characteristic of the “new man” in Christ!

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “Joy is the serious business of Heaven.” That is absolutely the case. Here in John 15 Jesus states clearly that He came that we might HAVE His joy, and that our joy would be full…complete…lacking nothing. He came to transform us from people of gloom to people of joy. He came to make us new…to make us like Him. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis describes the “new men” who have found full joy. He writes,

Their very voices and faces are different from ours: stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant. They begin where most of us leave off. They will not be very like the idea of “religious people” which you have formed from your general reading. They do not draw attention to themselves. You tend to think that you are being kind to them when they are really being kind to you. They love you more than other men do, but they need you less. They will usually seem to have a lot of time: you will wonder where it comes from. When you have recognized one of them, you will recognize the next one much more easily. And I strongly suspect that they recognize one another immediately and infallibly, across every barrier of color, sex, class, age, and even of creeds. In that way, to become holy is rather like joining a secret society. To put it at the very lowest, it must be great *fun*.

The joy…even the fun…that we all long for is to be found in Christ. As we abide in Christ, we are transformed into His likeness, and our joy will be full…we will be made new. That is the goal of the Christian life.

**3) Rejoice Always**

Finally, we cultivate joy in the regular practice of rejoicing! I read this week that the word “re-joice” is actually the prefix “re”…which means “to do again”…and the word “joy.” To rejoice is to “joy again!”

Remember the words of Paul in Philippians 4 that we read last week: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!” Paul is not simply waxing religious here—he is coaching a young church that is no doubt facing fierce persecution and hard times. Trust me, the first century church faced circumstances that make 2020 look like a picnic! And yet Paul instructs the new believers: practice joy! Recite joy! RE-JOY over and over again! Set aside the doomscrolling and practice JOY scrolling! To rejoice always means to find reasons to be thankful in all situations. It means enjoying the simple gifts of the Giver even when we face seasons of suffering, so that our hearts can remain thankful and generous under all circumstances. Rejoicing always means remembering that the LORD is at hand; so we need not be anxious about anything. But listen church: we must make a decision and determine at the very start of our day that we will practice joy; and then remain committed to that determination come what may. As my 8th grade basketball coach used to say, “Practice does not make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect!” In other words, make sure you are practicing that which is life-giving and edifying to your soul. Practice rejoicing, and before long, you will be one who finds more reason for joy than reason for complaint. You will be able to see through the gift to the Giver, and as you abide in Him, your joy will be complete, amen?

In closing, I want to speak to those who are hurting…to those who feel that they have no joy. Friends, listen to me: Joy has come for you. This is the good news of Christmas, and it is true. God has never turned His face from you; instead, He sent His JOY…His beloved Son to rescue us from darkness and despair. Call upon the name of Jesus. He is JOY, and He has come for
you. He will hear your cry; He will respond; and He will save you right now. The Bible says that “all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” I know that is true because Jesus saved me many years ago when in utter desperation I called upon His name. I was hopeless and in despair, and He came to me. It was a very real experience that utterly changed my life. He will change your life as well. That is why Jesus came, suffered on a cross, died, and rose again. He came to defeat death and the power of sin, that we might be resurrected and made new with Him. If you are feeling hopeless and void of joy in your life, today is the day. Call upon the name of Jesus, abide in Him, and return to joy.

Will you pray with me?