

## ***An Advent Message: Joy***

### ***Preface:***

Today we are talking about Joy.

We've already talked about hope and peace, and I hope that we've been able to think more about these things, these great virtues--what we think they are, where in our lives we've experienced them and promoted them.

### ***Introduction:***

But we're talking about Joy today. And, as we've been doing, today may not revolutionize your entire outlook on the world, but I think that it will at least remind us that Joy is a gift, that it's something we should grab tightly to whenever it blooms up around us, and that in some real way it's what we've been made for.

I'll share a few of my thoughts about it, and, since of course it's our goal to become more like Jesus, whose birth we're so close to rejoicing in, we'll talk about his Joy, too.

But first, let's pray!

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***Forgetting Yourself:***

I've spent all week thinking about joy. Which is a silly thing to do, really. I mean, it's probably the most ridiculous thing to do, because over the years I've come to believe, deeply, that the heart of joy is forgetting ourselves. That the heart of joy is forgetting ourselves.

What I mean is that joy is what happens when we're not, you know, analyzing our own motives, or reflecting on our guilt or obligations, or wrapped up in our own head, with its anxieties and worries. To be joyful is to be selfless and self-consciousless. It's to not only not care what other people think, but not care what we think about ourselves, either.

A person overwhelmed with joy acts like Adam & Eve before the fall, they've got no sense of shame or embarrassment at all. They will do crazy things. Shout, yell, run awkwardly toward someone in excitement.

They'll hug when they aren't really "into" touching people. They'll sing it on the mountain, you know.

If you're full of joy, for any reason, you forget yourself for a moment. The ways all of us protect ourselves all the time--being proper, being quiet, being measured and deliberate--they're out the window.

Joy is not self-conscious, it's selfless. It's forgetting yourself.

### ***Plenty & Cheap:***

When we're young Joy is plentiful; it happens a lot, I think. But as with all sorts of things that are in the world, when we're young we don't value it so much. It's too common, and we're not aware that we're unaware. As we get older, and become far more aware of how hard life can be, how much mourning is going on in the world that we can mourn with, I think we experience Joy first-hand far less frequently.

The trade off is that we can rejoice with others far more deeply when we realize just how precious Joy is. This is why

kids running all over the church is good and healthy and a gift. When we say that kids keep us young, in some ways we're just saying that they remind us the world is a place where Joy can happen. It's a place where you can forget yourself and your self-consciousness, you can neglect the bad news of the world and not feel guilty about it, and you can just be.

### ***Agents:***

Too, children remind us that we are agents of Joy sometimes. We can lead other people into experiencing Joy. When I was younger--two or three months ago--if you surprised me with candy, oh man. All the pain of the world faded to the background of that surprise. Gifts, good surprises, miracles, promises made and kept: all these things are sources of Joy for us. They're sources of joy, because they interrupt our deep focus on ourselves and our obligations and our responsibilities and, for a moment, they cause us to forget ourselves.

Good parents offer these to their children, even as they train them up into responsibility and a broad view of the world. And the fact that we can lead others into joy reminds us that we ourselves are led into it. I mean, there's something powerful about the efforts of a friend to distract us from our troubles when they do it out of love. (This isn't to say grief isn't important, or problems don't need solved, but it is to say that we cannot live only in our heads, wrapped up in the weary burdens of the world.)

In fact, we're almost never joyful alone.

### ***Relational:***

As is the case with so many other things, real Joy only happens in relationship, we are only ever really joyful because of something another person has done with our Joy as their goal. God does this all the time, acts with our Joy in mind when He acts on our behalf.

Maybe we can be contented, pleased, or happy by ourselves out in the woods looking at a mountain; but Joy seems to be something that happens especially when people gather together, even, I guess, if those people are real sometimes only in our memories.

### ***Contagious:***

But even if we can experience Joy apart from other people--which I doubt, really--Joy still best happens in relationships with others, because there's something about Joy that is contagious. If we are close to or close with anyone who is experiencing joy, it's really hard not to catch some of it.

In fact, we have to work to stay dour and not smile when someone's joyful and has turned our way. It takes effort to hang onto our grumbly negativity. And of course, Paul reminds us that we are to rejoice with those who rejoice, which is easier said than done, of course, for all sorts of reasons.

### ***Jealousy:***

It is funny to me how easy it is to rejoice with kids. But I think it's honestly because very few of us want to be kids or want what kids rejoice in and over, which points out what seems to me the real problem we can have when it comes to rejoicing with another person: our jealousy.

Jealousy, if it's anything, is an over-attention to ourselves, a deep attention to our wants, and a desire to have for ourselves what others have. It's self-attention at its best.

But if you are rejoicing, just caught up in joy because of some great thing that's happened to you—but I want what you just got—it takes great training, a great decision to reject our selfish desire if we're to celebrate with you.

So, simply: We train for Joy. The same way we train for hope or for peace or especially for love. We train for Joy. We do things that make us more likely than unlikely to catch Joy from someone else. We turn away from ourselves. We watch our responses to the world. We gather with friends who help us get out of our own heads. We play, which, at its best, focuses not on ourselves but on the thing in front of us and the people we're playing with.

And also, we don't put Joy out.

### ***Snuffing Out Joy:***

Some of us have been training for or been trained by the world to expect only sadness. We can feel like Joy and even Joy's more common cousins--pleasure, happiness, contentment--that these things just don't have the force that sorrow has in the world or in our lives.

And there is a bit of realism in this, right? Because the world is hard, and sadness and trouble seem to be a common denominator for us people.

But we forget or have never been taught that Joy can cut through darkness like a light. It is a power and a miracle, and

the devil hates it. And if there is one thing that we Christians could do to snuff out evil it would be to provide more opportunities for people to experience Joy.

And while there are few things more complex than sadness, and few things more straightforward than Joy, it is at least partially Joy's simplicity that gives it the power to banish sadness for a little while in this world. So of course Joy cannot last, not here. The world is just set against it, you know. But anytime there is Joy we should rejoice with it, we should drink it in.

It's a rare thing; a miracle and a blessing.

But you know what I do, too often: I put it out. Carolyn will often get really excited about some thing, joyful about something that happens, or some news she hears, or some surprise gift that comes her way. And I'll, selfishly, introduce a note of caution, a word of wisdom, or make an "I'm not sold on this" sort of face. Bo will come to me so selflessly proud, so happy about something, and I'll remind her that there are poor people in the world, and we have to care about them.

I'm basically insufferable. Terrible to live with when it comes to this. I'll steal the miracle that Joy is in this world--for helpful, reasonable reasons, you know. I'm not trying to be a grinch: whether or not I'm trying, though, I become one.

Joy does many of the things hope and peace and even love do: it's part of this group of things that can sometimes make no sense. We can experience them for no real good reason

at all, they last and carry us when they shouldn't. These are intrusions of good into a dark world, and we should protect them, and not discount the power or the worth of a moment of Joy in this life.

Are you a joy snuffer-outer? Don't reflect on it too much; you've got to get out of your head if you're going to do anything about it.

***Reminder:***

But we live this life in a world that is imperfect, broken, and breaking us down with sin and trouble. This world is not as the world was meant to be. And we are in this season of Advent--so close to Christmas--remembering all this stuff.

And what we need more than anything is to drink deeply from whatever moments of Joy come our way, because Joy, when it passes into some other thing, reminds us when it fades that life is not the way it should be, and that we look forward to a life where Joy is permanent, and lasting.

Joy is our destiny. Joy that is entirely relational, because God will be with us and we will be with one another without shame and embarrassment and sorrow. Our momentary experiences of Joy in this world, which fade, can become year-long advent reminders that what we see around us not all there is, and the world will also fade and be replaced with something better.

As Christians, our purpose is joy, not for its own sake, because real joy is never for its own sake, it can't be—that's too self-conscious a position to take—but it's for God's sake. When we realize the deep pleasure we bring God, we forget

ourselves in God's affection for us. We don't care what we look like in the mirror, we don't care what anyone thinks of us, we just know, deeply, that God is for us not against us, and we have nothing to prove and everything to offer.

When the Psalmist cries out, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." I think that the plea is, in part, a plea that God would anchor our memories and thoughts in himself, that we'd be directed away from our sins, our obligations, our troubles, and remember the heart of salvation: God loves us, has pursued us, and will not abandon us.

And this is all because of Jesus, right?

### ***Jesus:***

The author of Hebrews writes this long recitation of people of great faith in God and the troubles they have to endure. If we shouted out Old Testament folks that we could remember, we'd probably be shouting out names from this list the writer gives us: Abraham, Jacob, Moses. The famous ones, famous for their faith in God. Chapter 11 of the book.

It ends like this:

***"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."***

And the write continues on in Chapter 12:

***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great***



***cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”***

Listen to me, to Hebrews, again:

***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”***

The pragmatists are right, you know. We live in a world where Joy is not universal. But whenever it comes to us we fail if we hide it under a basket or put it out wherever we find it. But Jesus—Jesus who is on his way, whose first arrival we celebrate joyfully because it was a surprise and is a gift better than all the candy or cash or capital in the world—Jesus knew sorrow and pain and terrible trouble.

He was a stranger in the world, strange because he wasn't stained by the world's sin and the world's brokenness, and

strange because in spite of that he experienced sorrow and terror and shame.

But Jesus knew the Joy set before him, and because of it could take up all the terrible things the cross symbolizes. Jesus knew that death would not speak a final word over him, but he would triumph over it. And his resurrection, which vindicated everything he had done, also transformed every sorrow of his life with Joy. He forgot himself for our sake, didn't live in his own head, but lived for ours—our heads, our hearts, ourselves.

It's the same Joy that we've been promised we'll experience, too. And I don't know if our resurrected bodies will be able to handle more joy than the ones we've got now do--I think about living joyfully all the time and it exhausts me, you know--but I do know that Joy thrives in the peace and pleasure and closeness that we'll have when God is fully with us.

### ***First Advent:***

But we don't need to wait until Jesus returns to experience Joy: and that is a miracle. If Joy will mark Jesus' return, his second advent, it just as fully marked his first. If it's true that Joy is what happens when we are surprised with a wonderful thing, then there was no greater surprise than Jesus' arrival in the world. If it's true that Joy is what happens when we forget ourselves for a moment, then maybe Christmastime is our easiest entry into it, because Christmas simply isn't about us. We're given a chance to get over, or around, ourselves, and catch whatever contagious joy those we're with hold.

And everything we know about the first Christmas is that it was one of Joy. When Mary, Jesus' mother, goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant in her great old age with a son, John the Baptist, Elizabeth tells Mary "As soon as I heard the sound your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for Joy." Mary sings "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." An Angel declares to shepherds "I bring good news of great joy for all the people." And we could describe the way all those in the Christmas Story respond to Jesus with Joy.

### ***Conclusion:***

Look; the world is filled with surprises, and not all of them are wonderful. But if we rest in the presence of God we can be people who fully receive with Joy whatever good thing comes our way. We can be people who no longer have ourselves as our great concern, and laugh freely, praise God willingly, accept the world as it comes to us, and seek to bless whoever we're near.

We can be people who give Joy to one another, and act as agents and ambassadors of God's delight, doing what we can to position those around us to rejoice.

We can nurture the personal relationships that Joy thrives and blooms in, and we can gather up memories of Joy for one another, and remind each other of them so that sorrow does not win in it's battle for our hearts.

We can reject all the urge that's in us to kill joy when it comes up around us, and instead, allow ourselves to be led

by the Spirit who is in us, and rejoice with those who rejoice.

In this world Joy is a gift, and we are Christ's gift-givers. This in-between time in which we live? For God's people it is one that started with Joy at Jesus' arrival, and will end in the same if we just hold the course in our faith. So rejoice! Rejoice! The Lord is come. And if Joy comes your way, hold tight to it, drink deeply of it, it is special and you are blessed.