

The Second Sunday in Advent - "Joy"

Luke 1:39 - 45:

"At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Are you happy this morning?

Every year what is called a World Happiness Report is conducted. One thousand people from 160 countries are asked the following:

"Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?"

The number one country in the world for 2021 was Finland whose average rating was 7.8 rungs on the ladder, followed by Denmark, Switzerland and Iceland. New Zealand was tenth. The United States was 18th but only by .33 of a rung. Not surprisingly the least happy place in 2021 was... Afghanistan.

It doesn't ask, "Why?"

And the other caveat is this: it took place in March this year. (Remember March? 😊)

But is happiness the same as joy?

Luke refers to joy more than any other New Testament writer.

It's punctuated throughout his gospel and bookends his account.

It's here at the beginning - "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."

Then later after Jesus' resurrection the disciples are filled with "joy and amazement".¹

For Luke "joy" is a mark of meeting the Messiah.

But it's not only Luke.

Acts associates the activity of the Holy Spirit with rejoicing.²

Paul describes "joy" is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that all believers can know.³

It seems clear that if you were to ask what is a main distinctive of believers, the answer would be "Joy".

But what is 'joy'?

Well, think of a joyful person you know... do you know anyone who's joyful?

What is it about them?

There is a genuine levity they carry about with them.

There is a lightness in the step.

Joy is the exuberance and lightness of spirit found in Christ.

If that's the case, why isn't that our experience?

Tell the person next to you.

Well for one,

- ***What burdens are you carrying that you shouldn't be carrying?***

We can carry burdens of all kinds, all shapes and sizes.

The past, maybe regrets or lost opportunities.

Family - from our children to our aged parents.

Career choices.

Money concerns.

Health.

For pastors and ministers and leaders it's often the local church.

They can feel the great weight of church's health and future weight heavily on their shoulders. The expectations can pile up.

¹ Luke 24:21

² Acts 8:4 - 8; 13:52

³ Galatians 5:22

For me one of the great liberating aspects and realisations I came to was this: this church isn't my church. It isn't your church either. You may have attended here all your life and served in different capacities but it's still not your church. Yes, we have time, talents and treasure to offer. We are part of His Body and have gifts to offer in His service. He is the Head and Chief Shepherd of the church. Jesus said I will build my church.⁴ The church isn't my church or your church - it's Christ's church.

The same with your life.
Your life is hidden in Christ.

So imagine this bucket is your life.
The water that fills the bucket is the joy knowing Jesus gives.

When you are carrying burden, like rocks in a bucket, the burdens displace your joy.
Not only that but anxiety and worry and even fear creep in.
We feel psychologically and emotionally but also at times physically.
And our passion in following Jesus becomes impeded.
You can't live lightly.
So me there are times when I lose my peace and my joy because I've taken on a burden I'm not meant to carry.

To make place for joy you have to cast your cares on Christ who cares for you.

Are you carrying a burden you're not meant to be carrying this morning?

- ***Another big, big reason why people don't have a joy is because they do not have a clear conscience.***

This happens when there are sins that we will simply not face up to.

That means there are things that are in your life that because they're bothering your conscience they're robbing your joy.

An impure conscience is a joy killer and whatever it is you've got to get it off.

Again, imagine the bucket is your life.

⁴ Matthew 16:18

The water is the joy that Jesus gives but right down here, there's a hole. All this joy is meant to be coming in and it is but you wonder why the bucket never fills up. It's because you have a hole here that's wounding your conscience.

And the great aspect of the Advent and Christmas is that Christ the *Saviour* has been born.

He will save his people from their sins *and* empower them to live holy lives.

There is joy in being forgiven *and* joy in walking in obedience.

In fact in John's Gospel Jesus said:

"If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

I have told you this [why?] so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Jesus says when you know me and my words and obey my words, then there is joy because for one you will have a clear conscience but for another the Holy Spirit is able to move in your life in a powerful way.

You can experience fresh forgiveness this morning.

When you are right with God and have peace through Him through Jesus, then there is joy.

Then I think there's a third reason:

- ***The sin under all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ.***

The reason for that is because we are tempted to think that our real joy can be found elsewhere.

What we're really pursuing is happiness.

What the world calls happiness is getting control of your life so that you keep your circumstances favourable - which means you keep getting what you want.

All the things that we attach onto today and think "If I have that, then I'll be happy".

So we do is we centre our life's happiness - identity, purpose and worth - on all sorts areas:

- A spouse or partner

- Family and children
- Work and career
- Your sexuality
- Money and possessions
- Pleasure, gratification and comfort
- Relationships and others approval
- A 'noble cause' or ideology
- Religion and morality⁵

The thing is, nothing can bear the weight of carrying your expectations for happiness.

Timothy Keller, a pastor in the United States, tells of counselling two different women, both of whom were married, both of whom had husbands who were poor fathers, and both of whom had teenage sons who were beginning to go off the tracks at school and with the law.

Both women were angry at their husbands.

He talked about the unresolved bitterness and the importance of forgiveness. Both women agreed and sought to forgive. However, the woman who had the worst husband and was the least religious was able to forgive.

The other woman was not.

This puzzled the pastor until one day the unforgiving woman blurted out, "Well, if my son goes down the drain then my whole life will have been a failure!"

She had centred her life on her own happiness of her son's happiness and success. That's why she couldn't forgive.

The great difference between happiness and pleasure and true joy is that our happiness dependent on circumstances.

Yet our circumstances are constantly changing.

He changes, she changes, the weather changes, the stock market changes and if your joy is resting in that the no wonder that people and circumstances take away your joy all the time.

What we need is the unchangeable.

⁵For these insights I am deeply indebted to Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 159 – 173; n275 – 276.

Talking about his death and resurrection Jesus says in John 16:22:

“Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no man will take away your joy.”

There is a joy - an exuberance and lightness of spirit that goes deeper and that only Jesus can give.

(Some of the women here need to hear that literally 😊)

C.S. Lewis said these words:

“If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

So how do you know if you're seeking your joy elsewhere?

- ***“Your religion is what you do in your solitude”.***
- ***What do you do with your wallet or purse?***
- ***What happens in you when your prayers go unanswered and hopes are frustrated?***
- ***Look at your most uncontrollable emotions.***

A final comment before we close: sorrow is not the opposite of joy.

Sadness, sorrow, pain, hurt and disappointment are a part of this life.

There are times of lament.

Yet underneath that there can be a joy in Christ that's not forced or faked the sits alongside sorrow.

In the end you may say, “Well, I'm still not feeling it.”

Well, Joy is a gift.

So this morning my final word to you would be “Ask”.