
What have you done so far to prepare for Christmas? I’ve seen plenty of images of people’s trees for this year, and I’d bet many of you have already been out buying gifts to put under those trees. Since Tammy and I are in the middle of a remodeling project, we haven’t put up any decorations yet, but we’ve scheduled some Christmas parties to attend. It is now acceptable to let the Christmas music play, and it’s time to break out those Christmas sweaters. If you’re like me, you have this little pressure inside to get things prepared for Christmas and the joy that is to be shared with those you love.

But, as one of your pastors, I want you to know that the real preparation for Christmas happens here on Sundays during advent; when we stop and remember who we are and why we are here and what this whole thing is about anyway. And can I tell you with all conviction what I want you to receive as a gift this Christmas is gift that you will never outgrow. It’s the gift of a savior. It’s a gift that came to us over 2,000 years ago; not wrapped and under a tree, but born to a young family and laying in an animal’s food trough. This is the gift I desperately want to give my children, all of you, and anyone else I come to know this year. That’s what we come to remember as we gather for the next few Sundays of Advent.

I have this routine. Most Sunday mornings I wake before my wife Tammy and get ready for church usually in the dark. Thank goodness I have the flashlight function on my phone to assist me, but there have been a few times I realize that I’ve had some wardrobe mishaps that I couldn’t see until I found some light. It’s not easy seeing in the dark, is it?

Throughout Advent we tend to focus on the different attributes of Jesus that we mentioned with the lighting of the Advent candles. (Attributes like Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.) But this advent we are going to focus on just one of these words and that is Joy. Our hope is that we could rediscover the Joy of Christmas, and today I want to focus on how to do that when we feel like we can only see the darkness of life. How do we find joy when the only light we can see is the equivalent of a cell phones light or less?

The Christmas story in both Matthew, and Luke’s gospels are just filled with joy. In fact, the Bible’s themes of joy reach a crescendo with the birth of Jesus. Especially in Luke’s gospel, you see this idea of joy. But the truth is there are seasons when we feel joyous. There are some Christmases when we don’t feel like singing Joy to the World. You may be in one of those seasons right now, and it may seem like talking about joy is just a cruel hoax. And I’m not talking about depression today, although that certainly is a joyless place to be. This message is not about beating depression in three easy steps. No, today I want to talk about the theology of Joy and how we can experience it in the dark times. And by the end of today I want you to choose joy in the midst of wherever you are in life.

There’s some debate about how you define joy. For instance. In a dictionary it is defined as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. Maybe you could write down the one thing that brings you the most joy and happiness in life. Go ahead…I’ll wait a moment. Now, tell someone next to you what you wrote down. Go ahead, I’ll wait another moment. Here’s what I notice…when people talk about the things that bring them joy, it brings a smile to their face. Even when you’re down, talking about joy makes you feel more joyful.

So, I’m going to tell you a couple things that bring me joy.

Sitting on my front porch and just enjoying the company of my adult children brings me joy. This last summer I had a few moments when my kids came over to the house and helped in a remodeling project. And after we were done, we’d sit outside and share a cold drink and talk about life. I loved my kids when they were kids, but being able to be their friend as an adult bring joy to my life.

I’ve noticed that most of the times I’ve experienced joy in my life comes in relationships, and not stuff. Which is a good reminder that what you need most at Christmas is not something that you buy for one another, but it is actually a relationship with one another. But there is some stuff that brings me joy also.
The Bible has a few ways of talking about joy. And one of them is that feeling that I’ve just described, but most often in the Bible, joy is a disposition of the heart. It’s a way of being in life that is closely tied to gratitude. In multiple places in scripture we see this. Like in Hebrews 12 it tells us to, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:2 NIV) The cross? That doesn’t sound like a happy experience. And yet, somehow, he found joy in facing the cross because he knew it would have some kind of purpose, some kind of redemptive meaning in changing the world. And there was some joy in that for him. 

I think about the apostles after they had been arrested, and how they left the prison cells rejoicing because their experience of Christ. I think of Paul and Silas after they have been beaten and thrown in to a cell in Philippi. Do you know what they were doing later that night? They were singing songs of joy and praise to God. I think about James, Jesus’s brother, when he says Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1:2-3 NIV) Trials of many kinds? That doesn’t sound like some kind of happy experience, and yet we are to consider it pure joy.

Joy in the midst of trials, in the face of the cross is not about a happy experience and all about a disposition of the heart. This disposition of Joy comes from a truth that God is the source of Joy. And so, we can thank God not for the adverse situation, but in the knowing that God walks with us through it. You might remember the word Immanuel, from the song, Oh Come, Oh Come Immanuel. It means God with Us. It’s one of the names of Jesus. God is with us in the great times, and the dark times, and because of that we can have the disposition of joy.

There are over 400 verses in the Bible that talk about joy and those 400 can be broken down into three different views of joy. The first one is that feeling that I just mentioned. Joy is the happiness you feel when something good happens to you. It’s found when children are born, or the harvest came in, or when the Israelites where freed from slavery and returned to their land. That is real joy. They are conditional on our experience in the moment. But a lot of the verse of joy in the Bible are not about a feeling that we have in the moment but about something else.

The second category is when the psalmist or the Biblical author is describing a joy that can happen in the future based on what God has done in the past. It’s a joy on knowing that something WILL happen even though in our current situation we may not feel that. It’s an anticipatory joy. It’s a joy of deliverance. It’s not just about happiness. It’s a kind of faith that trusts that God is with me and is for me. Psalm 30 captures this well. The Psalmist is looking back over his life and seeing where God has been there in the past, and will be there in the future. O LORD my God, I cried to You for help, and You healed me. O LORD, You pulled me up from the depths; You spared me from descending into the Pit. Sing to the LORD, O you His saints, and praise His holy name. For His anger is fleeting, but His favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may stay the night, but JOY comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:2-5)
Joy comes in the morning! We have different ways of saying that. We say, “The worst thing is never the last thing.” And, “Life wins.” Because we have God in our lives, that terrible thing in the moment won’t be the only thing, and we find joy in that.

About a month ago I recognized that my joy was gone. By all account’s life is good. My wife loves me, I have a great job and a great mission. I have friends and family that I cherish. Sure, I have life stresses that many of you have as well. But I sat in my office one morning during my prayer time and it became painfully clear that my joy was gone. I was tired. I was numb. I just didn’t care about anything. Everything was dark. And what was even clearer, was that all of those feelings had been living with me for a long time.

And so, I did what I know to do when the dark times come. I prayed. I stayed connected to others. I continued with my devotional life. I went for walks. And yet, nothing helped. And so, one afternoon I sat on the front porch and told Tammy what I was feeling, and you know what happened? Nothing. I still felt nothing. I told some other trusted friends what was happening within me, and still nothing. But I knew that the worst things, the dark things will never be the last things.

And then four weeks ago I’m sitting at lunch with a man telling me about the calling he is experiencing in his life asking him this question. “When did you hear God speak to you?” And sitting there at the Eagle Drive in that afternoon he began to tell me of an experience he had 10 years earlier where God spoke to him through a pastor who was there in one of his darkest times. He told me about how his life started to change that day, and the pastor he was talking about was me. “Ugh.” And in the moment, a little light pierced the darkness I was living within. I’m still not full of joy. But I know that it will come.

Weeping may last for the night, but Joy…Joy comes in the morning.

We don’t find joy in the darkness, in the illness, in the loss of a child, in the addiction, in the depression, no…we find joy knowing that light will come back to you. There may be pain for a season, but joy will come in the morning. God will deliver you and sustain you and the light, the joy will return in some form, at some point. This kind of joy and trusting is about know that God is still with me and I’m going to make it through the worst. The worst thing is not the last thing.

The third way to see joy in the stories in your scriptures in the belief of people that God will force good from the dark times. You may know the passage in Romans 8 that says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom 8:28) It says that God uses all things, the good and the bad and all the ones in between. And so when we are in those dark times we wonder, “What is God going to do with this.” This is why Jesus could face the cross with Joy. Because he knew that God would take this inhumanity, this suffering and death and redeem the world. Which is why the Apostle James can say to consider it pure joy when we face trials. It’s because we know that somehow God will redeem us, or others, because of what we suffer through. God will bring something good from it. It’s not that he causes it to teach us a lesson, it’s about how God won’t waste those moments and will make something good from in spite of them.

This is why Paul could write form a prison cell in Philippians to [slide] Rejoice in the Lord Always. (vs 4:4) And he could also say 1Thess 5, [slide added to the previous slide] “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” (vs 5:16-18) BE joyful always. How is that possible? He tells us how…by praying with out ceasing. And by giving thanks in every situation. Which gives us the ability to experience Joy in the midst of this all.

Author, pastor and theologian, Henry Nouwen says this, “People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself and that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness. They point each other to flashes of light here and there, and remind each other that they reveal
the hidden but real presence of God.” I want you to choose to live in the light, to choose joy. Not to feel happy and giddy and euphoric all the time, but to have a deep sense inside that regardless of the darkness you find yourself in, it isn’t the end.

Shane Stamford has a rare disorder in which your blood doesn’t clot normally because it lacks sufficient blood-clotting proteins. It’s called hemophilia. If you have this disorder, you may bleed for a longer time after an injury than you would if your blood clotted normally. At the age of 13, Shane began receiving treatments from blood transfusions, and in 1986 he discovered that he contracted HIV from those transfusion. This was well before knowledge about the disease was widespread. At the age of 16 he heard from the doctors that because of the treatments that were given to him to help with one condition, he now has a life altering, life threatening virus. They said, “Shane we’re sorry. We don’t know how long you have to live. You may have two months, two years or longer. We just don’t know. We’re so sorry to give you this news.” Shane is still alive today and is a pastor in Memphis and he’s written couple books. And in the opening to one of his books, Making Life Matter: Embracing the Joy in the Everyday he writes about an encounter he had with his grandfather not long after he got that news.

They’re sitting outside overlooking a valley one day and the topic came up and his grandfather leaned against him, looked him in the eye and said this. "If anybody has a right to get in the corner and have a pity party about this, it's you," he said. "It's a very raw deal, and I can't tell you that I understand it or have even begun to confront my anger over it. But as bad as this seems, and I know it's bad, you have a choice to make. You can get in that corner, and if you want me to, I will get in there with you."

My grandfather paused. I had never heard him talk about giving up or giving in to anything. But here he was with tears in his eyes, saying that he would crawl into that pity party with me, if that is where I needed him to go. "But I know you, maybe better than anyone, and I know what is in your heart and deep in your soul, and I think you are going to make another choice other than pity, retreat, or surrender. I think you are going to live each day to the fullest with everything you have. I think you are going to take each day, no matter how many you have, and make something of it. No one can ask any more of you." And that 16-year-old boy thought his grandfather had a lot of wisdom that day and he chose to live each day, not knowing how many days he would have, to the fullest. He could have lived each day in a pity party, (and no one would have judged him for it) but he chose to live each day with hope. He made the most of that day, and every day since. He chose the words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Rejoice in the Lord Always. Shane chose joy.

I’ve heard another preacher say this about joy, and rejoicing once. If you’re gonna re-joice, you got to have some joice to begin with. You must have some reserve of joy to draw from in order to rejoice. The catch is, that thing called joy does not come from within us. You cannot manufacture joy on your own. You can’t buy joy. You can’t bottle it up. It doesn’t come in pill form. It must be discovered. It must be searched for…reached for…anticipated. And that ‘joice…that Joy is found in the one that “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” His name is Jesus. He is the gift of Christmas. He is the light that shines into the darkness. And to rediscover the joy of Christmas, we have to start with him.

Yes, weeping may last the night, but the good news of Christmas is that JOY comes in the morning. The worse things are never the last things.

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1 Henri J.M. Nouwen, Return of the Prodigal Son
2 Stanford, Shane. Making Life Matter: Embracing the Joy in the Everyday