

Choose Joy

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Did you know that the word *joy* is used more than 200 times in the Bible? The word *rejoice* also appears more than 200 times. Variations such as *happiness*, *blessed*, and *celebrate*, combined with *joy* and *rejoice*, are found over 2,700 times in the Bible! Clearly God is giving us plenty of information and instruction about joy.

Last week at the beginning of the service, I smiled when Cindy mentioned that this week's message would be about joy. She said that when we met to plan for Advent and were deciding who was going to speak on which of the four words, I readily claimed *joy*. Peace, hope, and love are important to my life and faith journey, but joy holds significant meaning for me. I have always had joy in my life, even in the darkest times and places. Not joy with a small j, but Joy with a capital J! The kind of knowing and experience that can only come from the Holy and that transcends human feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and cheerfulness. Laurel's title for her message last week was "Choose Love," and my title this week is "Choose Joy." Earlier in Advent, Lynne and Cindy spoke about peace and hope being choices. I believe in the saying, "You will find what you seek." If you seek or focus on the negative things in life, that is what you will find. But if you seek the positive, that is what you will find—even joy with a capital J.

The world is so filled with negativity, pain, suffering, violence, abuse, anger, and hate that there seems to be no way to escape sometimes. We face death, loss, setbacks, calamities, pain and suffering as we move through the process of living. We sure do not need to look too far to find any of these things around us. If we are not experiencing these things ourselves then we know someone who is or can look at the news, social media or listen in the aisle of the grocery store. Pain and sadness, death, sickness, loss, and suffering are everywhere. When we are amid these feelings and experiences, or see them all around us, how on earth are we supposed to be happy or feel good? It may feel like an impossible task to smile or see something good in our lives or the world, let alone experience joy.

When Cindy was doing the announcements at the beginning of service last week, she made me laugh when she talked about me claiming joy. She then told us about Ken Getchell's passing, and I was crying as quickly as I had laughed. In the space of a few breaths, I felt joy and grief separately, together, and interchangeably. This felt like a snapshot of life. We are created to feel a myriad of emotions. We hope to feel happy, peaceful, satisfied, and good. We do not want to experience emotions like sadness, grief, loneliness, despair, and depression.

In the last few weeks, we have certainly been hit with loss and grief. We have lost people we deeply care for and have watched others grapple with the loss of their beloved husbands, parents, and friends. Many of us are dealing with illnesses, in the hospital or at home, weak and in pain or discomfort. We continue to grapple with the effects of a multi-year pandemic and a world that is changed in some ways forever. We continue to have new ways of being in this church family that come with exciting possibilities of growth and discerning how God is alive and moving among

us. We are also grieving the loss of a way of being and practicing our faith that has deep roots and special meaning for many. We are living in a place of tension, a place where we experience a variety of thoughts and emotions at the same time.

How do we find joy? Feel joy? Be joyful or even know what joy really is? Especially given the pain and loss, grief, and devastation that is present for many of us personally and on a global level. The answer partly resides in first understanding what joy with a capital J really is, where it comes from and that it is something we need to decide to choose or not. The Oxford dictionary defines joy as “a feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” Biblical joy, or as I have been calling it “joy with a capital J” is different than earthly joy. Joy is described as a fruit of the Holy Spirit that is produced by God’s work in us and for us. Biblical joy is something that comes from God. It is an ongoing gladness of the heart that comes from knowing, experiencing, and trusting in Jesus. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, “*joy, in other words, is the response and the reaction of the soul to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Biblical joy is not based on our achievements, goals, possessions, or situations like worldly joy is. Warren Wiersbe defines joy as “*that inward peace and sufficiency that is not affected by outward circumstances.*”

The Bible Project says that joy is an attitude that God’s people adopt, not because of happy circumstances but because of their hope in God’s love and promise. This is where decisions and choices come into play for us as people of faith. It may be difficult or feel impossible for us to choose joy at times in our lives. As people of faith, we are not exempt from feeling or experiencing pain, as the last few weeks clearly demonstrated. The Christian life like all human life is full of pain, loss, and sorrow. We will experience circumstances that cause deep suffering. Even during our most difficult times though, we can still choose to have joy because of our hope in Christ and the love and grace given freely by God. Biblical joy is more than a happy feeling. It is a lasting emotion that comes from the choice to trust that God will fulfill the covenants with us and care for us and that there is more for us than we can see or know in this time and place. *The Bible Project* says, “The joy of God’s people is not determined by their struggles but by their future destiny. This is the promise of love and Grace that is offered us by the Holy.” When we are aware of God’s grace and favor and choose to accept those gifts offered to us then we experience joy. By focusing on God and the things of God we can experience and relish joy in all the circumstances of our lives.

In our scripture reading from Luke, Mary is praising God and “dancing the song” of her God. Mary is joyously praising and singing of God’s greatness to her cousin Elizabeth who is also miraculously with child in her old age. Mary is expounding on the greatness of God, praising God, and saying how she is the most fortunate woman on earth. When we take a moment to look at her situation, we may be amazed that Mary is able to praise and be joyful at all. Here is a teenage girl, engaged but not married, pregnant but a virgin, living in a time when being an unwed mother meant being an outcast and shamed or worse. Imagine Mary, having to tell Joseph that she is pregnant, wondering what others will think or do to her. There is no way to convince people she is still a virgin despite her pregnancy and to tell others she is pregnant through divine measures would seem ludicrous, insane or blasphemous. Anxiety, worry, fear, panic, and many other emotions must have been part of her experience. Being an unwed pregnant teenager even today elicits these emotions and more. Imagine it in the time that Mary lived!

Despite the circumstance that Mary found herself in, she felt joy. She praised and trusted and accepted God’s grace and love for her. She chose to focus on love and joy and sang joyously and

thankfully those praises to her cousin Elizabeth. Like Mary's praise and joyful expressions, the bible is full of examples of people choosing joy despite difficult circumstances. Examples given in the Bible Project include when the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt they rejoiced in the middle of the desert, uncertain of their future, vulnerable and far away from the promised land. Paul wrote about being joy filled and happy despite being locked up in prison and facing torture and death. One pastor I was listening to in preparation for this message, stated that Philippians was probably the most joyful book in the bible precisely because it was written in prison. Paul had no possible earthly joy or happiness as he lingered in prison. He solely relied on and looked to God as a source of comfort, love, and grace. In that reliance and God seeking, Paul found and experienced joy with a capital J.

The Bible is full of scriptures that speak of joy and finding lasting joy in God. We heard several of them today. Our Psalm reading tells us to get our help from God and put our hope in God. Our reading from Isaiah tells us that the entire world will rejoice, singing joyfully and celebrating and that ill people will be healed, the land will become fertile, even the lowliest animals will have enough to drink. All because of God's grace and love for us. Did you know that God commands us to be joyful? There are many verses that speak of joy, rejoicing, being glad, spreading the Good News and many other variations on the word joy. Most of those verses contain commands that tell us to be joyful. Here are just a few examples:

“Rejoice always.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16)

“But let the righteous be glad; Let them rejoice before God; Yes, let them rejoice exceedingly. (Psalm 68:3–4)

“Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.” (Psalm 98:4)

“Let the saints be joyful in glory; Let them sing aloud on their beds.” (Psalm 149:5)

“You shall rejoice in the Lord, and glory in the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 41:16)

“But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, And her people a joy.” (Isaiah 65:18)

“Make a joyful shout to God, all the earth!” (Psalm 66:1)

And finally, Philippians 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice!” Philippians was written by Paul while he was in prison. Despite this, here he is telling people what is expected of them by God from a man who knows the joy of God despite his circumstances. We are told to rejoice in God and to do it always! No matter what our circumstances we are to turn our eyes, hearts and minds toward God and experience the grace, love and Joy that is God. As if telling us once was not enough, we are commanded yet again to rejoice.”

In this season of Advent and Christmastide there is such an expectation of being happy, having fun and being joyous. We have decorated our sanctuary, have been singing happy songs for the last several weeks, are having a cookie swap after church today, and then there are the expectations of our families, friends, communities, society at large and yes even the retail industry. As I shared earlier, there are many among us and all around our community for whom this season is not happy or joy filled. They are sad, grieving, in pain, fearful or filled with depression, anxiety and dread. For people of faith, we can stand in a place that is set apart that is joyful with a capital J. The joy of God and in God. We can be sad and grieving, hurt or full of

sorrow and pain and yet still feel the deep and abiding Joy that is God. We need to seek and choose this joy that comes from knowing God and living in the presence of the Holy.

Yesterday we had a funeral service here for Connie Beckwith, a long-time member of this church who had attended regularly with her husband before he passed and she moved away. As we gathered and remembered Connie, we laughed, cried, shared stories and experienced joy and sadness all in this same time and space. I was honored to witness her family experiencing love for her and each other in their sadness and grief as well as their joy and laughter. As unorthodox as it might have been, we had the Christmas lights on the trees lit and shining and the Christmas decorations around her casket along with memorial flowers. Behind me we still have flowers from her service with ribbon that says "mother." Her sons suggested that we could remove the ribbons and have just the flowers on display. I thought it more fitting that we leave them. As we look, we see these memorial flowers mixed in with the decorations of this holiday season. We see before us an example of joy and pain, celebration, and sorrow. Reminders of the reality of the world in which we live and of the human condition. We will experience pain, sorrow, trials, and difficulties as we traverse throughout our lives, but my beloveds, God offers us grace and joy and all we must do is say Yes, keep our eyes focused on the Holy and step into the light of that love.

Amen.