

Series: Christ's Gifts that Turn Our World Right-side Up
#3: Joy in the Midst of Sorrow ¹
Psalm 28:1-2,6-7 and John 16:16,19-22 (NIV)
By John Gill

This morning, we have lit the candle of Joy. Perhaps no word is more associated with Christmas than "joy!" We sing "Joy to the World" on Christmas Eve as we are reminded of the joy of those shepherds "abiding in the fields," to whom the choir of angels sang, "I bring you good tidings of great joy."

Of course, we also associate "joy" with Easter Sunday, as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ from the dead. The women and men who visited the tomb and found it empty rejoiced that Jesus was raised to life on the third day, just as he had promised. There is no day in the Christian calendar more joyful than Easter.

But this Advent Season? As I've mentioned in the last two messages in this sermon series, this year so many of the themes of the Season ring hollow. Love, Peace, and Joy – seem in short supply. But as the title of this sermon series implies – Christ brings gifts to transform our circumstances and shower his spiritual blessings on us; "Christ's Gifts... Can Turn Our World Right-side Up."

Yes, in 2020, joy still seems out of place, doesn't it? We are confronted by illness and unimaginable numbers of deaths; by economic devastation as businesses struggle and fail; as people face unemployment, evictions and foreclosure on homes; as we watch children struggling to learn virtually, or in person with restrictions; as we are separated from our loved ones, unable to visit and hug them. And we are supposed to feel "joyful?"

In spite of all that, this morning, we have lit the candle of Joy. Advent is about Jesus coming into our desperate world – our world filled with sorrow. The Christ Child whose birth we will soon celebrate would have to endure unimagined anguish and suffering, and yet, he never lost his joy. In our scripture for this morning from John's Gospel, chapter 16, Jesus has gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, and he speaks to the reality of the sorrow that comes to every life. Even though Jesus knows that his disciples will soon also face trials and tribulations far beyond anything they could imagine, even though he is aware that less than 24 hours from that moment they would have to watch him die in agony, Jesus promises them the gift of Joy. How can they have joy? Their master and friend was about to be nailed to a cross and die a gruesome death, and they are expected to have joy?! It doesn't make sense, does it?

The reason we have difficulty making sense of this is because we misunderstand what Jesus means by joy. The joy Jesus desires for us has very little in common with the watered-down anemic understanding you and I often have of joy, a joy that is fleeting and conditional. Just as in another place in John's Gospel, Jesus says that he came to share his peace, but not a peace like the world offers us, here he declares that we might have joy, but not the empty joy the world offers. And, just as he says that he came to bring us a more abundant life, he offers us a more abundant joy.

What is the nature of this joy Jesus came to bring us? Well, before we look at what this joy is, maybe it's helpful to say what it isn't:

It's not a false joy, the kind of phony "joy" we find in our world. There are people who always seem to be on an emotional high – they are so Pollyannaish that you know they are faking it sometimes. Their "joy" is so sickeningly sweet that they send you into sugar shock. They put on a show of joy – perhaps to impress others, but sometimes they do it to mask the sadness and desperation of their lives. Phony joy is not what Jesus is talking about.

He also is **not referring to those people who have a "grin and bear it" kind of joy**. They know they are supposed to be joyful, so they say, "I'm going to be joyful, even if it kills me!" They may say they have joy, but you'd never know it to look at their lives. You've known people like that: they call themselves Christians, but look like they were baptized in vinegar. They smile through clinched teeth. Their version of "joy" is just as phony as the sweet syrupy kind.

And Christian joy is also **not "fair-weather" joy** – a "joy" that is on-again, off-again, dependent on how our lives are going at the time. Jesus warned about this kind of shallow joy when he told the parable of the soils in Mark 4 (:16-17), as he described seeds that fall on rocky ground, that sprouted but soon dried up because they didn't put down roots. Jesus said this: "When they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away." In other words, they lose their joy.

Most of us are guilty of this anemic kind of "joy" – I know I am. My joy is often "fair-weather" only. I'm great at being positive and enthusiastic when life is going well. But let something go wrong in my life, and I'm a "Gloomy Gus." (You can just ask my wife...)

I'm not a "Gloomy Gus" right now in my life, but honestly, I can't really say I am "joyful," either. Perhaps it's the tensions and conflicts we are seeing in America these days. Or maybe it has to do with the fact that for the past ten years, my life and health have been overshadowed by prostate cancer and the uncertainty such a diagnosis brings to your life. Perhaps it's just a "funk" I am in at the moment. I don't know.

It's hard to focus on Joy this morning when we are feeling so much sadness in our nation and in our lives. In the midst of this pandemic, we are focusing our thoughts and prayers on all those who have become ill and died, and we are praying for those left behind to grieve. We can almost empathize with those disciples in our scripture text facing their own troubles and grief. Just as they needed to be reminded to be joyful, so do we.

It's amazing how easy it is for us to lose our joy when life is hard. If our joy is genuine, it shouldn't be that way, Jesus is saying.

So, the joy Jesus is referring to isn't phony, or forced, or fair-weather. **True Christian joy is deeper and more resilient than that. It's a joy that flows out of our faith.**

I think the problem we have in comprehending this kind of joy is that we have confused joy with happiness. In our scripture, Jesus isn't speaking of a shallow happiness. He is referring to a deep abiding sense of joy. Happiness is dependent on circumstances – we get a job, and we're happy; we get married, and we're happy; we have a baby, and we're happy; we retire, and we are happy. But what happens when circumstances turn against us – when we lose our job; or our house is in foreclosure, or a

loved one dies; or we get sick – what then? We definitely are not happy. But we still can be joyful – in spite of our circumstances.

It is a joy that carries us through the dark and troubled times of our lives. It can do that because it is not dependent upon circumstances. Instead, it is grounded in a relationship with the One who gives joy – Jesus Christ. Our circumstances may change, but our relationship with God through our faith in Jesus Christ remains constant.

In the chapter that follows our scripture for this morning, Jesus is praying for his disciples - but he also makes it clear that he is praying for all of those who will come to believe in him through their testimony – in other words, Jesus prays for you and me.

As we read his prayer in Chapter 17, Jesus is praying for his friends that, despite the horror that was about to unfold before them, they might not lose the joy they had found in following him. They would need his joy within them if they were to survive what was to come. But then, his prayer turns to us - that, no matter how challenging the situations of our lives may become, God will grant us a deep and abiding joy that transcends our circumstances – a joy that rests solely on our relationship with God.

That was good news to the disciples in that Upper Room, whose lives were about to become exponentially more difficult. And it is good news to each of us in this gloomy Advent season. It is good news to know that, no matter how problematic our personal lives may be – in spite of the trials and tribulations you and I are going through, we can still experience joy – the “full-measure” of joy Jesus makes available to us when we have faith in the promises of God.

So, that’s why we are able to light a candle of Joy this morning. It reminds us that no matter how dark and difficult our journey may be, even leading to a cross and a tomb, there is joy, because there is the promise of an Easter dawn. The journey those Disciples were on led to Good Friday, but it didn’t stop there – Easter was just around the corner! And there is an Easter around the corner for us, as well!

As Jesus said to his confused and discouraged disciples in John chapter 16, he says to you and me, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” (John 16:22)

A thousand years before the night Jesus offered us his joy, King David put the same truth beautifully and simply (Ps. 30:5) when he wrote: “Tears may flow in the night, but joy comes in the morning.” (GNT)

In this dismal Advent – as we “sit in darkness,” there is a Star shining in the East. Jesus is on the way! And because God sent his Son into the world, you and I are able to endure the gloom of our own Calvaries, knowing God has promised that “joy will come in the morning!”

¹ Much of the structure and content of this sermon is based on an audio sermon online, preached by James Jones Jr. <http://www.deridderpresbyterian.org/Sermons/john.htm>