

## **Joy!** Isaiah 12:1-10; John 15:9-17

Adapted from: "Joy: Fruit of the Spirit and Advent." Steven Simala Grant @ SermonCentral.Com

In *The Applause of Heaven*, (Word Publishing, 1996, pp. 6-8) Max Lucado writes of a certain King:

No man had more reason to be miserable than this one--yet no man was more joyful. His first home was a palace. Servants were at his fingertips. The snap of his fingers changed the course of history. His name was known and loved. He had everything--wealth, power, respect.

And then he had nothing. Students of the event still ponder it. Historians stumble as they attempt to explain it. How could a king lose everything in one instant? One moment he was royalty; the next he was in poverty. His bed became, at best, a borrowed pallet--and usually the hard earth. He never owned even the most basic mode of transportation and was dependent upon handouts for his income. He was sometimes so hungry he would eat raw grain or pick fruit off a tree. He knew what it was like to be rained on, to be cold. He knew what it meant to have no home. His palace grounds had been spotless; now he was exposed to filth. He had never known disease, but was now surrounded by illness. In his kingdom he had been revered; now he was ridiculed. His neighbors tried to lynch him. Some called him a lunatic. His family tried to confine him to their house.

Those who didn't ridicule him tried to use him. They wanted favors. They wanted tricks. He was a novelty. They wanted to be seen with him--that is, until being with him was out of fashion. Then they wanted to kill him. He was accused of a crime he never committed. Witnesses were hired to lie. The jury was rigged. No lawyer was assigned to his defense. A judge swayed by politics handed down the death penalty. They killed him.

He left as he came--penniless. He was buried in a borrowed grave, his funeral financed by compassionate friends. Though he once had everything, he died with nothing.

He should have been miserable. He should have been bitter. He had every right to be a pot of boiling anger. But he wasn't. He was joyful. Sourpusses don't attract a following. People followed him wherever he went. Children avoid soreheads. Children scampered after this man. Crowds don't gather to listen to the woeful. Crowds clamored to hear him. Why? He was joyful. He was joyful when he was poor. He was joyful when he was abandoned. He was joyful when he was betrayed. He was even joyful as he hung on a tool of torture, his hands pierced with six-inch Roman spikes.

Jesus embodied a stubborn joy, a joy that refused to bend in the wind of hard times, a joy that held its ground against pain, a joy whose roots extended deep into the bedrock of eternity.

So that as the prophet Isaiah said, we might “*with joy draw water from the wells of salvation.*” (Isaiah 12: 3)

## Joy

This morning, on the third Sunday of Advent, let’s talk about joy. Just to get you thinking, let me ask: are you a joyful person?

Note that I didn’t ask, “Are you happy?” That is different. Most of us instinctively recognize that there is a difference between joy and happiness, yet it is a challenge to put an exact definition on that difference. Lucky for all of us, I got a little help from the advertisement section...



So there! Joy is apparently found in the anticipation of consuming a certain soft drink. But we can’t be too hard on the advertising industry; perhaps they looked up joy in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary where the definition reads: “*Joy: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires*”.

My goodness! Is that all joy is?? An “emotion” that comes when everything is going well, when we are rich and successful, have all the stuff we “desire,” and are drinking pop from a blue rather than red colored can???

I beg to differ!! I’m sorry soft drink companies, your commercials are slick but you don’t know about joy. I’m sorry Webster, but you missed the boat on this one also. Let’s turn to a better source.

Just before going to the cross, Jesus took the opportunity to instruct His disciples one last time. They have left the upper room, and are on the way to (or perhaps have just arrived at) Gethsemane. In that context, Jesus said this:

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. ...You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." John 15:9-17

If you **keep my commandments**,  
you will **abide in my love** ...

I have said these things to you  
so that my **joy** may be in you,  
and that your **joy** may be complete.

The key verse in this passage for us today is 11: "*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*" He told them what? These two things: "**keep my commandments**" and "**abide in my love.**" Why did Jesus give us these commands? He said the reason was so that we might have complete joy.

**The first command is obedience** (keep my commandments). Jesus said that obedience results in joy. We sometimes believe the opposite—that God has given us this list of "things not to do" to limit our freedom and make us miserable—but the opposite is true. Obedience to God is the path to joy,

- not only because obeying by staying away from the things we are not supposed to do saves us pain and hurt,
- but also because in the doing of all the things we are supposed to do we find significance and purpose and life.

**The second command is to remain** to "abide in my love." Henri Nouwen has said, "*Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved.*" You and I have known that unconditional love of Jesus at moments in the past; Jesus' command to us is to remain in that love. To never get sidetracked, to never get persuaded otherwise, to never lose sight of the eternal truth of Christmas:

- Immanuel, God with us.
- "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son..."

To pick on another corny jingle: Jesus is not necessarily the reason for the season. People were partying their way through mid-winter long before he was born, just as a way to get through the cold and the dark. But Jesus is the reason we can have real joy in this season. With his birth, Jesus came into our world to seek out and save the lost—that's you and me! And having found us—Jesus promised us both an abundant and eternal life and that no one could ever snatch us out of His hand (John 10:10-28).

So Jesus is welcoming us, commanding us, to remain under His wing, to remain wrapped in His arms, to remain always in the midst of the fact that we are loved perfectly, unconditionally, truly, not by virtue of anything that we have done or failed to do, but solely by the grace of God.

As we do, we will know joy, a joy that is not about feeling, circumstance, or economics.

- Rather, a joy that is about being a part of something that is both for now and for eternity—the Kingdom of God.
- Joy that is about being part of a family, which meets here week after week together in worship and in seeking God.
- It's about being part of a mission to share the incredible good news of salvation with a world on a highway to hell.

So you will never find joy in a can or in any other “thing,” joy is found in a lasting relationship. And what is more lasting than eternal life with Jesus.

Here are two more truths about joy:

**Joy has nothing to do with externals.** It has nothing to do with your clothes or your smell or the size of your wallet. It has nothing to do with your health or your career or your “position” in life. It has everything to do with your heart. It is a gift of God, produced by God, grown by God, as we let Him work in us. That is why Paul puts it second in his listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

“the fruit of the Spirit is  
love, **joy**, peace, patience,  
kindness, goodness, faithfulness,  
gentleness, and self-control.”  
Galatians 5:22

Joy is a gift from God often regardless of our circumstances. I did a brief survey of the word “joy” in the New Testament and was startled by how many times the idea of joy was side-by-side, hand-in-hand, with the idea of suffering. It was constant, pervasive, and the message was that the externals don't matter. You might be suffering, you

might have everything you ever wanted, it doesn't matter; joy is about something different.

Joy is about knowing that we are loved by God. We are saved by God. And then, when we know that, nothing else really matters.

The second lesson is that **joy is only found in giving**, in being focused on others rather than on ourselves, in meeting the needs of others rather than our own, in sacrificing our desires so that others might experience theirs.

Think even of Christmas—who has more joy, the giver or the receiver? I know for me, I am far more excited about the gifts I give than the gifts I receive (even though I appreciate and enjoy them all!!) You see, there is no joy in any “things”—joy comes in our choice to give, to express love, to help, to encourage, to be there for one another.

As George Bernard Shaw said:

“This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap, and being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

Leo Tolstoy said, *“Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service, and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.”*

Jesus said, *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete”.*

On this third Sunday in Advent I wish for you, for us all, all the joy in the world. But remember that joy is a gift from God, one of the fruits that the Holy Spirit produces in us. And also remember—while we cannot create these things in ourselves, we can stop God from creating them in us. So in order to receive this gift of joy we must also be changing those areas where we are preventing God from creating joy within us.

Chief among those, at least for me, is selfishness. I can see that the times when I am not full of joy are the times when I am most focused on myself. You may have noticed in this passage from John, that the very next thing Jesus says is,

This is my commandment,  
that you love one another  
as I have loved you.  
No one has greater love than this,  
to lay down one's life for one's friends.  
John 15:12-13

We will never find joy in serving only ourselves, but rather in loving God and loving one another. That much is an act of our will, a choice we make: **to live for others first, and for ourselves second.**

If you aren't sure what joy looks like in real life, watch a devoted parent of a child from birth through to at least elementary age and many times through to adulthood, and you will see what I mean. If you look deep into the eyes and hearts of the parents, you will see them taking great joy in caring for their child.

So I wish for you all the joy God can give you. If you need to confess selfishness or something else first, please do so. And then simply do this: open your hands, place them on your lap, and pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, we fix our eyes on you, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before you endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We open our hearts before you. We confess our selfishness and the misery it causes, and ask for forgiveness. We choose with our wills to live for you, and for others. And we ask that Your Spirit would fill us with joy. Amen