

The Heart of Christmas (Part 3)

Sunday, December 11, 2022

Good morning, church. Can you feel it in the air? The countdown has begun as we quickly move toward Christmas day and the celebration of the birth of Jesus! We are in the middle of a sermon series where we have been discovering the heart of Christmas. It is easy to get lost in all the gifts, decorations, and parties and miss the central focus of Christmas. Jesus was born to bring the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love, and that is the real reason for this season. The first week we learned we are offered hope in the middle of our circumstances because of God's faithfulness.

Hope is at the heart of Christmas

- THE PRESENCE OF DARKNESS THREATENS OUR HOPE
- THE LIGHT OF GOD'S PRESENCE HAS COME TO GIVE US HOPE
- HOPE IS OURS TODAY

Last week, we looked at the wonderful gift of peace that Jesus's sacrifice makes available to us. We are made right with God, ourselves, and others because of Christ.

Find Peace In The Heart Of Christmas

- THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS IS PROMISED TO ALL PEOPLE
- THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS IS FOUND IN THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST
- THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS PROVIDES RECONCILIATION TO GOD
- THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS WAS MEANT TO BE PASSED ON

This week, I want to introduce one more piece of the heart of Christmas: a joy that is ours no matter the circumstances.

The Heart of Christmas Brings Joy In All Circumstances

KEY TEXTS John 1:14 // Romans 5:8 // 1 John 4:9

Why does the joy we experience in life seem to be so circumstantial? The circumstances of life have a way of robbing us of joy. Disappointment, frustration, and loss can suck the very life from us; but shouldn't we be able to have an abiding joy despite the negative circumstances that may surround us? Jesus's birth reminds us that, no matter how hard life is, we don't have to go through it alone. God has come to us full of grace and truth, and that should bring us joy. We can trust that Jesus's presence with us will reveal the truth about our lives and at the same time will offer us the grace to see things change.

Illustration: I want you to begin to think about what things bring you the most joy. This week, what happened to you that filled you with Joy. What happened this week that took your joy away for a few hours, a day, several days, or even the days to come?

This week's sermon is so important because, for many of us, our joy is reflective of this illustration. Our joy in life is largely connected to the circumstances in our lives. When things are going well, we feel good. When things are going poorly, we feel bad. Our joy ebbs and flows. I believe one aspect of the heart of Christmas is that Jesus came so that our joy would not have to fluctuate with our environment.

As John began his gospel letter, he gave a different perspective on the birth of Jesus. Rather than tell us his iteration with the shepherds, magi, and manger, he gave us a big-picture explanation of what took place in Bethlehem. What John wrote is a cause for joy no matter what we face in life.

John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

What John described is known as the incarnation. Coming from the Latin word *carne*, which means flesh, the incarnation was God putting skin on and becoming one of us.

Verse 14 says the Word became flesh. (Word is capitalized because it is the person of Jesus.) He is called the Word because he perfectly embodies all of scripture in human flesh by the way he lived here on earth. When Jesus was born in the manger, he was God coming to live among us—as one of us—with skin and bone, flesh and blood.

This passage gives us several reasons for a joy that does not have to change with the seasons or shift with our situations. It can be a constant in our lives and a grounding attitude in the face of all the world has to offer.

POINT # 1 – We are filled with Joy in all circumstances because God came to us

A common misconception people carry around with them is that to be reunited with God in right relationship with him, we must work super hard to be perfect, or strive to make our way to him. One of the greatest joy robbers in our lives is thinking we can never be good enough. We are broken and flawed people who hurt others, we make mistakes, and we live selfish lives. If we are relying on our abilities to earn a connection with God, we will always be disappointed.

It is impossible for us to make our way to God but It was not impossible for our God to come to us

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Luke 2:20

20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

And what had they been told...

Luke 2:10

10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

The wise men, too, felt the joy of God coming to us...

Matthew 2:10 (NKJV)

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

Though we often think of the story of the wise men as those who make a difficult journey to find Jesus (The king of Kings, God); the story reminds us that it is not us who

find God but God who finds us. God announced the birth of the savior with a star that led the wise men on a journey. They could not find Him on their own and when they didn't know where to go, the star appeared again and led them to the exact place where Jesus was.

Story: In *Discipleship Journal*, Paul Thigpen wrote about an encounter with his daughter. "I remember coming home one afternoon to discover that the kitchen I had worked so hard to clean only a few hours before, was now a terrible wreck. My young daughter had obviously been busy 'cooking' and the ingredients were scattered, along with dirty bowls and utensils, across the counters and floor. I was not happy with the situation. Then, as I looked a little more closely at the mess I spied a tiny note on the table, clumsily written and smeared with chocolaty fingerprints. The message was short—'I'm makin somethin 4 you, dad'—and it was signed, 'your angel.' In the midst of that disarray (and mess), and despite my irritation, joy suddenly sprang up in my heart, sweet and pure. My attention had been redirected from the problem to the little girl I loved. As I encountered her in that brief note, I delighted in her. With her simple goodness in focus, I could take pleasure in seeing her hand at work in the situation that seemed otherwise disastrous."

The same is true for our joy in God. Many times life can look like a messy disaster from our perspective. It can be hard for us to find reason for joy in our circumstances; however, if we look closely, we might see God coming near to us like he did that first Christmas night to let us know he is making something of our lives when we are tempted to feel hopeless.

Joy is at the heart of Christmas because knowing that we could never make it to him, God came to us. God wanted to be near to us in order to rescue us. It is the only religion in the world where the deity does what is necessary to unite with humanity. Paul emphatically makes this statement in the book of Romans as he insists we can be saved through Jesus.

Romans 5:6-8

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

For Paul, there is not a naughty list and a good list that we have to work hard to escape or earn. The gift of God's grace is offered to us generously without price because we could never afford it on our own. While we were sinners, Christ died for us. The arrival of Jesus brings us joy because he is the very presence of the divine. This is why the

characters in the Christmas story are so overjoyed—from the shepherds in the field to the wise men following the star to Simeon at the temple—because the long-awaited arrival of the Messiah meant God had finally come to rescue us.

POINT # 2 – We are filled with Joy in all circumstances because Jesus brings us the gifts of grace, mercy and salvation

12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Grace is unmerited favor... Mercy is undeserved forgiveness... Salvation means to save, help in distress, rescue, deliver, set free. Even the dictionary defines it as... preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss: deliverance from sin and its consequences

Mary and Elizabeth both overflowed with the joy that comes from these gifts in spite of the trials that they both faced...

Luke 1:39-47

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

46 And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

Simeon and Anna also expressed the joy of seeing these gifts of God come into the world

Luke 2:25-32, 36-38

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

In spite of their age and all they had been through, they were filled with Joy as witnesses of God's gifts of grace, mercy and salvation.

Grace is a word that shows up in the church a lot, but that is because it is the way in which we are able to live with joy.

Our heavenly Father sent Jesus to a manger in Bethlehem because He wanted to dwell among us to demonstrate his amazing grace, his mercy and his salvation. We can experience joy in our lives no matter the circumstances because we can be confident in knowing that God has given us the gifts of mercy, grace and salvation.

The third reason joy can be a constant reality for us in our lives is because of how much God loves us and is committed to our transformation through His power.

Psalm 51:12 (NLT)

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you.

POINT #3 – We are filled with Joy in all circumstances because God loves us just as we are but too much to leave us that way

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Looking further in John chapter one we find the author telling his readers that it is through Jesus that we see the glory and fullness of God. His arrival among us should fill us with joy because not only did God come close to us, but He came because he loves us.

Do you realize that you are loved by God? Not just tolerated or put up with but loved! Deeply loved. In fact, John says this love that God has for us is like that of a father for his children. Jesus came from the Father full of grace and truth.

This is key to understanding our third reason for abiding joy. When Jesus came to us, he came full of grace. This grace that John writes about is the Greek word *charis*, which means favor, kindness, or a gift of blessing. Like a wrapped gift shared from one to another can bring joy to our hearts, so this gift of Jesus is grace from God. We haven't earned it. We don't deserve it. But God offers it to us, and when we recognize it, it fills us with joy. God loves us just the way we are!

Jesus also came full of truth. The word John uses here is the word *aletheia*, which means divine reality revealed to man or a straightforwardness. Jesus holds grace in one hand that allows us to be accepted into his family, and in the other hand he holds truth that shows us the areas of our lives that must be transformed to live the fullest life possible.

Psalm 16:11

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The book of I John expounds upon this idea as well.

1 John 4:9

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

The author insists the reason Jesus came to us and manifested his love among us is because he desires for us to find incredible joy in him. In order for this to happen, it requires a gift of truth and grace. It is the most loving thing to do for another—to embrace with full acceptance and humble truth telling. Jesus is committed to being honest with us about what we need to repent from. He is also committed to extending grace and mercy to remind us that we are loved beyond measure.

Romans 14:17

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

POINT # 4 – We are filled with Joy in all circumstances because He is always with us

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (a permanent residence, he didn't just visit, but he came to stay) among us.

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace (grace upon grace, one gift after another, one loving favor after another) already given.

You know that one of my favorite verses is Hebrews 13:5 "never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." Along with Jesus words at the close of Matthew 28 "and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." I am comforted and filled with Joy because I know that He is always with me.

Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

1 Peter 1:8

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

The late pastor Charles Spurgeon said it this way: “There is a marvelous medicinal power in joy. Most medicines are distasteful; but this, which is the best of all medicines, is sweet to the taste, and comforting to the heart. This blessed joy is very contagious. One dolorous spirit brings a kind of plague into the house; one person who is wretched seems to stop all the birds from singing wherever he goes . . . [But] the grace of joy is contagious. Holy joy will oil the wheels of your life’s machinery. Holy joy will strengthen you for your daily labor. Holy joy will beautify you and give you an influence over the lives of others.”

This Christmas may you come to find at the heart of this holiday a deep and abiding joy because of the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus. It holds the power to change us and to change the world.