

Surprised by Joy

By Dr. Dave Neale

Let's talk about joy. How do we even talk about something that is ineffable – impossible to describe in words. As I read the texts for the week and examined this theme in the Bible, it was almost overwhelming how broad and glorious the theme is in our literature. There are innumerable references to the idea of joy, the experience of joy. It is the heart of our faith.

But what is joy?

First there is human joy, the joy of life. These are the moments we experience in the course of life. It's there when a baby is born, or on a wedding day. It can be like an intense pleasure when we see beauty or attain a desired goal in life – a job, or that home we dreamt of.

Then there is, for the Christian, the paradoxical joy that we experience in the midst of affliction. We might call this the discipline of joy. The verb form of the noun joy (χαρά, *chara*) is χαίρω (*chairō*) "rejoice, be glad."

This is the joy that we read about: ***Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer*** (Romans 12:2). Or the famous exhortation of the "4:4 Way of Life" of which I've spoken to you from Philippians 4:4: ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice! Or Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings...*** (1 Peter 4:13). Or, have you born hatred for your faith in Christ? Jesus said ***Rejoice in that day leap for joy for surely your reward will be great in heaven*** (Luke 6:23).

It is the discipline of joy. These are all verbs in the imperative mood – the mood of command. It is a choice we make when we suffer loss, or our back pain is acting up. Rejoice. It is the recognition of our blessings in God in spite of our corporeal reality.

By the way, *chairō*/rejoice is also used as greeting in Greek. It means hello, goodbye, have a good day. We could easily use it around here with each other. Instead of hello, I'd say rejoice.

It is the third kind of joy that we have in view this morning as we light this candle.

To those terrified shepherds, when the glory of the Lord shone around them, the angel of the Lord said, ***Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*** (Luke 2:10).

The source of this joy is God. Pleasure is one thing. Happiness is another thing. But joy only comes from God.¹

¹ It's a remarkable thing to me that our Zephaniah text talks about God rejoicing over his daughter Jerusalem, which I take to be a metaphor for his people, ***O daughter Zion***:

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.

We can't generate it or create it or whip it up. It is not in our power to experience it on command. As hard as we try with our light displays (I love them as much as you do!) and shopping and gatherings, it is important to remember that the radiation of joy is not from us. It is God who radiates the joy.

This joy is, in its nature, a rare experience for most of us. Some may have never felt it. Early in my Christian life, not long after my conversion, I had an experience of ineffable joy. In a way, my life has been a longing, a quest for that experience once again. I can't really say that that desire has been fulfilled.

I first read C.S. Lewis' spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy* probably 45 years ago. I have never forgotten his description of the experience of joy in his life. He was deeply agnostic and very much a man of a classical education, an Oxford man, who eventually came to faith. I have an immense regard for the man and his writings; his candor and genuineness.

As I read the book I waited to come to an experience of conversion that I recognized, that which we talk about in church, but it never came. Everyone's path to joy is different; it is such a complex and personal journey for each person.

Lewis writes: "As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries....It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden comes some where near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what: before I knew what I desire, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse... withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again.... In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else... the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world."

Here is what is amazing to me. Both of these Children of Joy, the man who prepares the way, and the man who is the Way, die as martyrs. Joy doesn't mean no pain.

For both men the message is ***Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***²

When the different people asked John what they should do he said ***Bear fruit worthy of repentance*** (Luke 3:8). And when the crowds asked "***What then should we do?***" He said if you have two coats give one away to someone who doesn't have any. Likewise with food.

When the tax collectors said "***Teacher, what should we do?***" He said don't collect more than is prescribed for you.

When the Roman soldiers of the occupying army were pierced to their hearts by his message said "***And what should we do?***" Don't threaten people and lie to them to extort money, just be happy with your wages.

Let's go and do likewise until we are visited with joy from on high.

Thanks be to God. Amen

² Matthew 3:2 and Matthew 4:17.