

Joy
Luke 2:2-20
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Last year I watched as the World Series ended. The last batter was out. Atlanta had won, the players were jumping and shouting and running together until they all fell to the ground in a heap. There was joy everywhere, smiles galore. A strut by this one, a high five by another, a shirt put on saying “World Champion,” announcers comparing the event and telling us it was like no other. But, fast forward from November to February 15: Spring Training for 2022 was beginning. Could the Braves do it again? What had been so much joy just a few months before was gone.

Does that mean that joy is something that comes and goes? Or is what I felt in November not joy—real joy?

Another picture: a father home from the hospital, a baby girl had arrived in the night, a first girl after several boys. The father was ecstatic and he went door to door, knocking, calling out, “we have a girl.” But no one was home, and the joy seeped out of him as he returned to the ordinary.

So, is joy something that only occurs when something wonderful happens?

Another picture: a son walks across a stage to shake a hand. The auditorium is quiet. The hands are shaken and a diploma given; the son had graduated from college, a mighty feat for a son who never met a book that liked him. A degree!

It could never be taken away, and a thousand doors would now open that never would have without it. A father watched and the tears came. Tears of joy, tears of release. Tears of an inner emotion that could not be held back. Success, accomplishment—and the tears came, and the father wept. But soon the tears ended and life returned to normal.

Does that mean joy is just an emotion that comes and goes?

Joy is a word associated with Advent. It describes both a gift being brought by Jesus and the reaction to that event called Christmas, that we read about every year. Luke is sometimes called the Gospel of Joy, because he uses the Greek word for joy—chara—more than any other writer. But the Bible is filled with the word,

and it always associated with the realization of what God has given us in Christmas. So when Luke uses the word over and over again, what is Luke asking us to see? Why was the Spirit telling Luke to keep going to the word joy.

First, let's hear Luke's description of the event that brought joy to earth and gave it to us as a gift:

Luke 2:1-16

- 1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.
- 2 This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.
- 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.
- 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.
- 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.
- 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,
- 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room available for them.
- 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
- 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.
- 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good tidings of great JOY for all the people.
- 11 Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.
- 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.
- 13 Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying:

- 14 “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”
- 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

Did you hear what happened? Christ was born – yes! But, did you hear the reaction? Heaven erupted, they spilled out and appeared on earth to those closest to the birth. And they sang! Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth, Peace and goodwill to men!” They couldn’t help it. They were so excited, they erupted. Why? Because they were full of joy! A joy not like ours---like the ones I described at the beginning—not a joy that would come and go. They were full of a joy that could never be taken away, a joy that would live within them forever. It was a joy that knew God had acted, that had heard all the plans and promises and prophecies God had made that someday, and now it was that someday. God’s plans and promises were in a manger in Bethlehem for all to see. The angels and the hosts of heaven knew what this day, this birth, meant, and they couldn’t help it—they sang, and they left a record of the joy that came with that birth, the gift that was that birth.

It was a gift of joy that would never go away. Not just happiness but an inner certainty,

an inner assurance,
an inner confidence

that no matter what might come, the confidence and assurance and knowledge of the salvation of all of humanity had come and would be available from then on, forever.

The gifts of Christmas were growing.

First, there was hope promised and given, meaning we had something to believe, Christ was coming and has come, something to rely on, Christ has changed everything and we are saved or can be.

Second, came peace—that gift of being one with God, made possible by the next gift.

Third, came love, defined as complete self giving, a love we are given and commanded to use, once we realize we are one with God—at peace, then this gift of love can become real---we can love one another as Christ commanded. When we get to that point the gift of joy will descend upon us, fill us, charge us, then we will have that confident assurance that no matter what, and there will be plenty of no matter what's, God spirit in us can not be taken away and we will prevail in our oneness with God. No matter what!

Those put to death by fire for their refusal to denounce Christ as Lord and Savior knew that nothing could separate them from God—not even the fire and death in this life—nothing, because they were filled with joy. This joy confirms and is based on our knowledge

that we are saved,

that we have God's word,

that we can talk with our God through prayer, anytime,
anywhere.

that God's presence is always right here, right in
front of us.

Joy is God's ultimate gift. Children come and go, graduations and accomplishments come and go, good and bad things happen, but Christ in us does not come and go, salvation does not come and go, forgiveness does not come and go. Joy then means we know we will always have a conscious union with God that doesn't depend on the circumstances we are in.

So, how do we keep this joy alive within us? The word JOY tells us---

J tells us to put Jesus first;

the O tells us to put Others second;

and the Y tells us to put yourself last.

I have seen this joy so many times, even here. I recall seeing it in an old woman on her death-bed who told a son, stand here with me as I pray, and she prayed for each one she knew, then said she had finished, She took his hand and looked at the son and closed her eyes and went to be with her savior.

I saw it last week in a member of our choir, who said she just had to sing, even though she couldn't read music and had no idea what a measure

or a Clef was. She sings because she loves her Lord and she knew her Lord loved her..

I have seen this joy on the face of a businessman told of having a fatal illness, with just months to live, who said, “thank God, there is time.” He used the next three months to ask all he had been rough or hard with to forgive him, one by one by one. He appeared in my office one day, asking, I could see the joy on his face.

Every year we rush to get ready for Christmas, meaning do we have enough presents? Can we make it to all the parties, can we get Christmas wrapped and delivered in time? Advent is a time of getting ready, but not the ready of the rush of another hectic season. Advent for us means remembering the amazing gifts we have been given—a babe, God coming to us, God revealing Himself to us, God making it possible for us to live, really live, in God’s kingdom, and giving us the gifts of hope, and love and peace and now joy to make living in that kingdom possible.

I asked each of you two weeks ago, have you opened the most important box always left for last or not opened at all? I called it the box from God? The box that brings the most wonderful, permanent gifts you could ever get? If you haven’t opened the box, do it today, do it now. And if you do, I promise you will be just like the heavenly host watching the events unfold that first Christmas morning—it was and is so exciting, they couldn’t help but erupt. They were filled with joy, the same joy Christ brought to earth, the same joy Christ has given us.

I saw on TV the other morning a question asked, what’s the best gift you ever got for Christmas? Most named things. I wish they had asked us, because we know of the better gifts: the gifts of hope and love that enable peace, and the presence of peace that fills us with joy, a joy that can never go away.

Isaiah 25:1 and 6-9

1. Lord, you are my God, I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things planned long ago.

- 6 On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a bouquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines (the Messianic Banquet).

- 7 On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations;

8. he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

9. In that day they will say, "Surely, this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in (the gift of) his salvation