

I read this week about a young boy who was complaining to his father that most of the hymns they sang in church were boring to him and too far behind the times. He told his father that the words were tired and meaningless to him. His father put an end to his son's complaint by saying, "If you can write better hymns, then why don't you?" So the boy went to his room and wrote his first hymn. It was entitled When I Survey the Wondrous Cross. That was in 1690 and the teenager was Isaac Watts.

Twenty years later, he wrote the lyrics to the Christmas carol, *Joy to the World*. Watts based *Joy to the World* on Psalm 98. It was his attempt to put scripture to music. He wanted generations of Christians to receive the call to rejoice, and he thought the words in the song were a perfect reinterpretation of Psalm 98 to express the joy that we should have when we celebrate Christmas.

Some more interesting background, if we read Luke 1:46-55, we see the close ties to Mary's song after she had been told by an angel that God had chosen her to bring the long awaited Messiah to the world. Although she didn't know what God's plan was going to look like for her, she didn't know all the details; she didn't know all the twists and turns, but Mary said, "*My spirit rejoices.*"

So the Bible is filled with calls to rejoice. It's filled with examples of God's people being joyful. The most common Hebrew word for joy is *simcha*. It means gladness of heart. Literally, the word is actually two words: *sim* means put, and *cha* means laughter. You put those words together and you see *simcha*. It means to put laughter in your life.

The Bible doesn't say much about our English word happiness, but it says a lot about joy. Happiness seems to be based on what is happening in the moment, on circumstances. Joy is different. Joy is that inner sense of well-being that has less to do with circumstances. God created us with a hole in our hearts that only joy can fill. And the problem is that instead of looking to Jesus for joy, we tend to look anywhere and everywhere else. It's been said that God is the most joyful being in the universe, and joy is deeply rooted in God's perfect heart.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." All the good things we know come from God and it's easy for us to lose perspective on joy. We might be asking how joy can be at the core of God when we are stuck in sadness. We are stuck in a loss; we are discouraged, or we are despairing.

We all have bad days, and for some of us, those bad days seem to stretch into bad weeks, bad months, and even bad years. Some of us feel like our circumstances have permanently robbed us of joy. You might be familiar with the sitcom, *Friends*. It's a catchy tune, but do you hear the words?

So no one told you that life was going to be this way. Your job's a joke; you're broke; your love life's DOA. It's like you're always stuck in second gear, when it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year. The Rembrandts

But I want to encourage you this morning that God makes a way for every one of us to be joyful, no matter our circumstances. Joy is essential for an abundant life. My prayer for us as we think about joy in Advent is that we can reclaim joy this Christmas. Every one of us. There are many benefits of reclaiming joy. Joy brings energy. Nehemiah wrote, "*The joy of the Lord is our strength.*"

With joy in our hearts, what happens? Sin becomes less attractive to us. Joy protects us from pursuing those enticing distractions that we find on earth that we are drawn to. Reclaiming joy helps us live godly lives. Joy helps take us through difficult circumstances and take us through them in stride. Life just works better when we're joyful.

Another important thing to understand about joy is that it is a byproduct. If I seek joy directly, I can miss the mark. Hedonism, which can be defined as the aggressive pursuit of pleasure, has been proven to not satisfy over time. I can enjoy a Trader Joe's dark chocolate-covered peppermint cookie. I can enjoy that. I'm sure many of us have and do. But if I keep eating them, at some point I'm not going to like Trader Joe's dark chocolate peppermint cookies.

We are made to seek God. Let's not miss that joy comes from a right relationship with God. God is behind everything that brings joy. A good conversation with someone over coffee. Seeing your grandchild smile at you when he sees you. Wonderful experiences like weddings, graduations, and anniversaries are shared with those you love. Let's reclaim joy this Christmas at CPC.

I want to offer three reasons from Psalm 98 why we can experience joy no matter our circumstances. Three reasons why we can sing "Joy to the World" at Christmas. The psalm starts out, "*Sing to the Lord a new song*" (v. 1a). The idea of a new song is found in many places in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. It's about a fresh expression of worship, a new sound, new words, a

rekindled passion to praise. The same old way may be giving way to a new song, to a new generation.

So why sing the new song? *"For he has done marvelous things;"* (v. 1b). We worship because of what he has done. The purpose of our singing isn't just because we like to sing or we enjoy the tune. It isn't just mindless praise. It's for the marvelous things, the miracles he's done.

He says, *"his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him"* (v. 1c). The idea here is that God is working miracles, especially the miracle of bringing salvation to people. The phrase right hand and holy arm demonstrate skill and strength. Most people are right-handed. I'm not. That's the strong and the dominant hand for most. That symbol of power, that symbol of authority. It's God using his power and authority to bring victory to his people.

"The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel;" (vv. 2-3a). It is one of the marvelous things, revealing salvation first to Israel. God's righteousness is reflected in the Old Testament in his covenant with Israel. Throughout history, he kept his promise and he stayed with Israel through thick and thin. He allowed them to rebel. He allowed them to suffer defeats. He allowed them to be ruled by foreign kings and put into exile, but God never abandoned them. To Israel, that's that line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His covenant starts there. Israel is the center. And the lineage of Jesus, who we celebrate at Christmas, goes all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Then, that same love and faithfulness extends. Well, how far? *"all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God"* (v. 3b). His salvation extends to the end of the earth, which means that his salvation extends to all the Gentile nations and every nook and cranny of the earth. Even more beyond what I'm sure the psalmist could imagine at that time.

The New Testament tells us that through the birth of Christ, salvation is revealed through Jesus. God's redemption plan is through Jesus. Deliverance is through Jesus. The righteousness of God is revealed through the person of Jesus and the message of salvation then that he gives us is delivered by us, his church, to the ends of the earth. Joy to the world. That's what it is. That's the message.

So the first reason we can reclaim joy this Christmas is "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," from the house of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through the line of King David to Jesus and then to the church and then out to the ends of the earth and eventually even onto the peninsula and here at CPC.

The second reason we can reclaim joy at Christmas is that our Savior reigns. *"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;"* (v. 4). So, he says to shout for joy to God because of the marvelous things from one end of the earth to

the other. God gives us permission; think about this: he gives us permission to shout.

The idea here is to burst out in spontaneous praise. Burst out into spontaneous song, like a shout of victory. A shout of praise at a moment of victory. When your team wins, when that deal is closed at work. You get the impression here that there's a volume and a power in this worship. It was loud in the temple. One commentator I read said that the temple worship was so loud and enthusiastic that it could be heard a great distance away. So it wasn't usually dreary, subdued, or lamenting.

There are times to lament and mourn our sins, and there are psalms with those themes, too. But verse 5 commands us to make music. *"make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the Lord, the King"* (vv. 5-6). I mean, that's loud. Trumpets? I played a trumpet in junior high band. That was as far as I went. We were loud.

So, he's adding instruments to accompany the singing. The harp, trumpet, and the blast of that ram's horn. What we're seeing is a worship band here. A band that requires a level of skill and effort to play together to add to the experience. We're so blessed here at CPC with our worship bands and our worship leaders. The experience and effort they put in to draw us in to worship, praising God with music. What does it do? It draws something from deep inside us.

I love the ram's horn here. That's a reference to the shofar. It was to be blown at special events like the year of Jubilee or when a new king was inaugurated over Israel. And what are we doing here at Christmas? We're celebrating the birth of the king. We're celebrating the Lord of Lords, the Alpha and the Omega, the Bright and Morning Star, God in the Flesh, Jesus, which means God saves, and this praise goes out to all the earth because he is the powerful king. He is the sovereign king overall.

So we can reclaim joy this Christmas because the Lord has come and because he reigns over his kingdom. This shout out in worship is in response to the Lord saving and bringing us into his kingdom. So first, the people shout for joy, then the psalmist goes further, and they don't stop there. He tells us that all creation joins in. *"Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord"* (vv. 7-9a). Can a river clap its hands? Can a mountain sing? The psalmist is saying so. He is using this metaphor that all creation, even the rocks and the water and the winds and the trees, are invited to praise the king.

Why does this matter? It's important for us to understand that the king not only reigns over all the nations, but the king reigns over creation. Creation is his. God created it all. The king can claim it because it's all his own. And creation also, as we do, waits

patiently for the second coming of Jesus to return and restore all things, to restore all of creation once and for all.

That leads us to our final verse. He rules the world with truth and grace. *"let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity"* (v. 9). One of the marvelous things that we shout to the Lord and sing out a new song for is something he will do in the future. Verse 9 is in the future tense. He will judge the world with righteousness.

I love what Jesus says in John 5:22. *"Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son."* All judgment authority is given to Jesus. At Jesus second coming, he will bring relief for those who suffer under sin, for those who suffer under evil, for those who are oppressed in their circumstances. He will bring justice to those who are far away and in prison.

I'm sure Paul thought of that when he was in prison in Rome. It's interesting to note that real justice in the ancient world was not common if you look back and study it. It was very rare. Inequity was common in the ancient world. And we know that there continues to be this lack of justice in many spaces today. And people groan for justice and hope to see things made right. I think verse 9 tells us that while we, as the church, work hard for justice on earth, we are assured that one day God will bring perfect justice.

Well, if we've lived enough life, we realize that much in life that happens to us is not according to our plan. Not for our comfort. And often, we are unable to control things. When things don't go as we think they should, we find it hard to be joyful. It's so good to understand here, and I think maybe this is helpful to you, joy is a journey.

Our joy grows as we walk through life with God, one step at a time. Our culture sells us on this idea that joy is experienced only after we arrive at something we do not yet have. Such as, I will have joy one day if I get married, if I'm healed of this illness, or if I score that dream job. Or when I retire from that not-so-dreamy job. Or if my spouse would change. Or when I have my perfect Christmas.

On the other side of the coin, which maybe some of us can relate to, is that inner guilt and that regret over decisions, choices, and sins that we have committed. And we may miss joy. We may sit here today and remember those past mistakes and sins. You say, "A joy message is not for me because I don't deserve joy."

Can we believe the scripture when it tells us that true joy is available to all in this present life? Can we take God at his word? Can we believe the scripture when it tells us that when we walk and step with Jesus, we grow in joy? Can we believe when we lit the Advent candle, that joy candle, that it applied to you?

Jesus says in John 15:5, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* And then, a little further on, in verse 11, he

summarizes it, *"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*

So Jesus is reminding us that real and complete joy is available and it's found in connection to him. We must give up this lie that there are things you could do in this life, things you can accomplish in your life that can produce true joy in and of themselves. It doesn't work that way.

Only through the Lord will we find lasting joy. And lots of things, apart from God, can bring temporary happiness. I understand that. But don't be duped into thinking that joy can come anywhere outside of a close relationship with Jesus.

In Philippians 4:4, the Apostle Paul wrote to us from a prison cell. He's in this dark, damp, unhappy place. Probably not hopeful that he'll ever be set free physically. And he writes, *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice"* (v.4). That's a command. It's emphatic. He's commanding us to choose joy. Joy is a choice. It's a critical piece of our spiritual formation.

I want to close here by giving three basic steps that I think can help us reclaim joy this Christmas. They're from a pastor, John Mark Comer, and he recommends these three steps. First of all, he says, give thanks. When thoughts come about how bad our circumstances are, how bad our lives are, and how unfair we've been treated, we need to direct our attention to what we can be grateful for.

I think that starts with this basic premise that life itself is a gift. And what do we really need this Christmas to experience joy if life is a gift and Jesus has come to save us. His kingdom reigns with righteousness, and one day, he will come back and judge and restore things, all things with grace and truth; that's a starting place for joy. Joy starts with gratitude, not with feelings of entitlement.

Second, draw near to God. Remember what we said earlier: God is the most joyful being in the universe, and he is our energy source for joy. We tap into that source by living in proximity to God. David writes this in Psalm 16:11, *"You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."* I don't know if you knew this, but Psalm 16:11 was a common verse that people had engraved on their tombstones when they were buried. I'm thinking, that's a beautiful verse, but when it's engraved on a tombstone, to me, it implies that joy only happens in the next life, that it doesn't happen in this life.

I think it'd be better used on our baptism certificate. I think putting it on there to look at what you have ahead of you as a follower of Christ. At the announcement of Jesus's birth, remember the story in Luke where the angel of the Lord appeared before the shepherds, and they were quaking and fearing, and the angel says, *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy*

for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

He is the Messiah. His name is Emmanuel, which means God with us, in proximity to us. Proximity matters if we want to reclaim joy at Christmas. C. S. Lewis wrote.

If you want to get warm, you must stand near a fire. If you want to be wet, you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, and eternal life, you must get close to or even into the thing that has them. They're not a sort of prize, which God could, if he chose, just hand out to anyone. They are a great foundation of energy and beauty, spurting up at the very center of reality. If you are close to it, the spray will wet you. If you are not, you will remain dry. C. S. Lewis

I think a challenge for us this Christmas season for joy is to draw near to him so you may feel the warmth of joy coming from him. Or may you be so close that you feel, just another word picture for you, the spray of joy from God. Be thankful. Draw near.

Lastly, renew your mind. Paul's final words on reclaiming joy in prison, he writes, "

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Philippians 4:8

Think about such things. It means meditating on and directing your attention. It's the exact opposite of so many messages that come our way through the media; who would have us say this verse a little differently if they were writing it. Whatever is untrue, whatever is ignoble, noble. Whatever is wicked, whatever is impure, whatever is ugly, whatever is gross, whatever is immoral, whatever is blameworthy, think about such things. No, don't think about such things.

Like Paul, we are to discipline our minds to focus on the goodness of life inside God's kingdom and give thanks often. And proximity matters. We need to draw close to the source to feel the warmth, to feel the spray. We need to renew our minds by thinking the right things, good things.

Recently, Julie and I were on a walk and Christmas decorations were starting to come out on some of the houses in our neighborhood. It's just fun to look at different people's houses and how they express Christmas. And we came across one, and it was one of those huge blow-up displays that, in the morning, just lay flat, deflated. So it was a blow-up manger scene. But then there was the strangest thing. I was walking by it and it just

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

didn't sit right. There was this big dragon that was behind it. You know, kind of looking down on the manger scene. The Christmas dragon. It's like this dragon seems to be lurking over all the action that's taking place in the manger. A dragon in the nativity, and then I remembered later it actually fits perfectly because if you look at Revelation chapter 12:1-5 in John's vision, there's this picture of the birth of Christ. You see a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. She's pregnant, she's crying out in pain, and as she's about to give birth, an enormous red dragon appears and stands in front of the woman so it might devour her child.

So this woman gives birth to a male child, and John says that the male child will rule the nations with an iron scepter, and then John says that her child was snatched up to God, up to his throne. So in John's revelation, the dragon is clearly Satan, the male child is Jesus, the woman is Mary. The true picture of the nativity should include Satan waiting like a dragon hoping to devour the child, hoping to rob us of joy.

What are those dragons that threaten to rob your joy, your cheer, your peace, your hope? Whenever you see a nativity at Christmas, may it remind you that the baby in the manger is stronger than all the dragons in your life. God has given you victory in Jesus. He has given you the opportunity to reclaim joy through this perfect Christmas gift of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

Joy to the world, and joy to you because the Lord has come. Joy to the world, and joy to you because our Savior reigns as King. Joy to the world, and joy to you because he rules the world with truth and grace. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us your Son. Thank you for allowing us to reclaim joy this Christmas through Jesus. May your Holy Spirit teach us to be thankful, teach us to draw near to you, to renew our minds in everything that is excellent and praiseworthy. Thank you for the reminder of all the marvelous things you've done and will do.

Thank you that Christians from every nation, tribe, and tongue can celebrate Christmas together because of Jesus. May the broken state of our world around us not rob us of joy. We look forward to your second coming, the second Advent when you will make all things right and exercise your perfect rule forever and ever.

© 2023 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1479-3FC