

TRUE JOY THAT ACTUALLY LASTS!

BRINGING
True Joy to the
WORLD

Please contemplate this question with me: **When was the last time you had a moment of utter joy?** I mean a joy that flowed through every aspect of your body and resulted in shouting your heart's fulfillment over what you were feeling? That's a big ask in this time of COVID resurgence, school shootings, inflation shrinking your Christmas gift buying power and the list goes on and on. There certainly are enough circumstances that seek to rob joy from our lives. It's such a big ask you may be at

a loss to name such a joyous moment right now.

God has a gift especially for you: JOY! LASTING JOY! God alone gives a joy that no darkness can overcome and no joy-robber can take from you! It's so much more than just being happy or putting a smile on your face. Happiness is fickle and requires happy circumstances. God's joy, on the other hand, sticks around. It doesn't get chased off by trouble, hardship, or adversity. God's joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit who resides in you and it's also a gift that only He gives with His presence and salvation. In the ESV version of the Bible, the word for joy (rejoicing, joyous) is found 430 times while the word for happy is found only 10 times. Of all the gifts on your Christmas list, lasting joy has to be at the top of the list. **Read more** about this gift that God looks to give you now and for eternity. It's a gift that you will want to bring to the world every single day.

Too many times our joy is circumstantial and fleeting.

So....did you come up with that moment of utter and lasting joy? Maybe you considered your graduation from high school or college, your wedding day, the birth of your child or grandchild. These are all awesome moments in time. But these moments don't sustain us with a joy that is lasting. I recently attended an event where the result was a matter of euphoria and utter joy. As a University of Michigan fan, the last game of the season has routinely been a matter of disappointment and sadness. But this year, Michigan beat their nemesis Ohio State. The Big House erupted with exultation and joy as the Michigan players lined up in victory formation. Since I sit in the handicap section, I certainly didn't rush the field. But I watched every inch of the field covered with fans shouting Michigan's praise, hugging, giving high fives, fist pumping and just overflowing with joy. Fox interviewed Aiden Hutchison. He said that every fiber of his body was filled with absolute joy. I have to admit that I have never been a part of a scene like that - a crowd of 111,000 people with such absolute euphoria.

One would hope that this joy would last and last. But that joy is quickly replaced with a businesslike approach needed to face the next opponent. That joy can easily be diminished with heartache with a loss in the College Football Playoff, an injury, a bad call on the field or even

the fear of being drafted by the Lions. (Detroit Lions fans know what I mean.) You can wear all the championship t-shirts, hats, and other items you like, but next year may be an entirely different story. Truth be told, we need a joy that will never be taken away. "Oxford Strong" does not remove the hurt that seems to last. How is it the hurt seems to last but joy is fleeting. **Where can lasting joy be found?**

God has an answer for you - and for the world where we live. The Third Week in Advent has a shift of emphasis represented by the lighting of the pink or rose-colored candle. The emphasis to this point in the Advent season has been one of repentance, anticipation, devotion to Word and prayer because Christ our King has come, He comes to us in Word and Sacrament, and He is coming again soon. Our King's gracious visitation to our hearts and lives is a source of pure joy! You have every reason to celebrate. Yes, YOU! (I know Christmas is just around the corner and the list of things to do just keeps mounting. Despite the fact that there are many joy-killers in this world, there is only One Joy-Giver - Jesus!) *"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" (John 8:12)*

The Prophet Zephaniah tells of God's gift of joy: *"Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The LORD your God is in your midst, a Mighty One who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing" (Zephaniah 3:16-17).* **This lasting joy that comes to us from God leads us into an everlasting joy and also emboldens us to share this joy with others.**

We need a Word from God - but can we handle it?

The prophet Zephaniah's ministry gives us insight into this shift of emphasis from heartache to joy. Zephaniah understood the truth that no one can know the true grace of God who has not first known the fear of God. (Remember your Small Catechism: "You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.") And yet, this may be the most difficult commandment to follow. Why? Because our sinful flesh seeks to put any and all things before God. We should fear (respect and awe) God as our Creator, Provider and Judge. But instead of this righteous fear, our hearts and minds are filled with fears for our health, safety, and security. This may be especially true this time of year. It's Jesus' coming to us - and yet we focus on "Here comes Santa Claus." It's Jesus' birthday but we fret over gifts for everyone else - even the mail person - before Him.

In chapter one of Zephaniah, the Word of the Lord came to him saying, *"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the Lord...The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the Lord. "Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. In the fire of His jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for He will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth."* These are scathing words! These are words of Law that drive us to repentance before our perfect God - who is justified in His wrath because all of us are sinful.

Scholars believe that the conditions of the time of Zephaniah were, in one word, “disgusting.” It was during the time when the nation of Judah was still reeling under the very evil reign of their two previous kings, Manasseh, who reigned 55 years and Amon who reigned 2 years. Their reigns offended God as they led the nation into idolatry of the grossest kind that included child sacrifice, witchcraft, and the building of pagan altars inside the Temple of God. It was an “in your face” rebellion, an outright assault on the holiness of God - the defiance, the pride, the depravity, the mocking of God, the arrogance of spiritual leaders, the complacent spirituality that led the people to say, “*The Lord will do nothing to us.*” God’s anger was more than justified. “*In the fire of His jealousy, the whole world will be consumed,*” warned Zephaniah.

Put these words in contrast to the words of Jesus in our Gospel. Jesus said, “*Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.*” Could it ever be - a people full of sin - offended by Jesus? Yes! The Pharisees were offended by Jesus because He threatened their authority and positions of power. His disciples were offended because He disappointed them with the way He demonstrated His messianic power.

There were times His words were just too hard to swallow: He claimed that He was the Bread of Life come down from Heaven. And when He speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, “many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him.” At other times it was His doing that caused offense - giving sight to the blind man on the Sabbath, when He ate with tax collectors and sinners and associated with prostitutes and Samaritans. Sometimes Jesus gave offense for what He didn’t do, like on Palm Sunday. He didn’t conquer Rome with political and military victory but turned out to be a compassionate and forgiving Messiah, full of mercy to the point of dying as a crucified criminal rather than seeking vengeance.

And then there’s John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ and His cousin, who witnessed at the Baptism of Jesus when God the Father spoke from the clouds and proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God. But in prison, He sends two of His disciples to ask Jesus, “Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect another?” **Have you ever been offended by something Jesus said or did or didn’t do?** I must confess that even as a pastor I have. How many times have pastors failed to speak a corrective word to an erring brother or sister? Or those times when even we as pastors have been too squeamish to defend our Christian beliefs even when Jesus has told us that He is the One Way, the ONLY WAY to Heaven? In this busy season, even we pastors put Jesus on the back burner when it comes to our “other” activities. Pastors can even confess that Jesus hasn’t lived up to our expectations - when a beloved parishioner isn’t healed, we may be caught saying the words of Martha or Mary - if You had been here, Lord, this would not have happened; or when God’s Word demands more than we are prepared to give. Yes, it happens to pastors, too. But God has a Word for all of us.

God’s Word of Law is harsh. But His Word of Gospel gives us lasting joy.

Zephaniah revealed just how offended God is with our sin. There is a striking similarity between the conditions of Zephaniah's time and ours. There is an "in your face" rebellion of spiritual apathy and complacency in worship and Bible study attendance, stewardship and living a relationship as God's children, thinking, "The Lord won't do anything to us." There is the sacrifice of children on the altar of convenience under the disguise of reproductive choice. There is the mocking of God as He is blamed for every natural disaster and even criticized for His lack of involvement in other tragedies - even by people who live their lives as if God didn't exist. How will God respond as He examines each human heart and see that it is deceitfully wicked? God's Word tells of judgement for our sin - and this just wrath leads us to our knees in repentance of our sinful nature and our sinful acts of thought, word, and deed.

These words of God make it very easy to preach the Law but also the blessed opportunity to proclaim the **Gospel - our reason for rejoicing at all times**. God's Word of Law doesn't call us to mask our sin but to repent at the foot of the cross. Jesus took our sin to the cross to replace it with the joy of restoration, redemption, and salvation. Talk about pure joy and euphoria. Our sin is gone. Our broken hearts are healed. We, who were dead in sin are now alive in Christ. We are children of the light and people of the resurrection. This is more than just putting on a happy face.

Have you ever been commanded to "put a smile on your face"? As a child, my family would visit a set of relatives once a year in downtown Detroit. This group of relatives included my cousin, Cindy. She was the only one close to my age. Despite begging (and bargaining - even to the extent of cleaning my room bargaining) to be left at home, my parents forced me to go. Before going into their house, my parents would glare at me with bulged eyes and say, "You put a smile on your face and pretend you're having a good time." This was a full day of torture - playing with dolls, listening to boy bands - you get the picture. Terrifying, right? Put on a happy face? NOT! I never received the counseling I needed for this torture.

When God commands us to rejoice in Philippians 4, He is not commanding us to put on a happy face no matter what your circumstances. But God is saying we **MUST** rejoice. Why? God is present with us! He is our Joy. Paul follows God's command - lying on the prison floor awaiting certain death saying in effect, "I know what I'm saying. I've thought of everything that can possibly happen. And still I say - rejoice!" Christian joy is independent of all things on earth because it has its source in the continual presence of Christ. Paul uses a prison word - guard - to help us rejoice in Christ! For while the soldiers may be guarding him in prison, it's Christ who is guarding his heart and mind; guarding and keeping him in the midst of this world, in the midst of trouble and strife; guarding and keeping him for eternal life. So while the soldiers look strong, it's Christ who is the real guard! And so Paul is joyful and confident. God unlocks the prison of sin and death and frees us to rejoice in Him always.

Zephaniah understood what most people then and today have forgotten - the final ingredient of any recipe for unhappiness is to forget Immanuel: God with us! No one or no thing or no circumstance can take the presence of God away from us. Immanuel is with us so we can live

with joy, knowing and trusting that we are always in good company and that we are safe and secure in His arms no matter what troubles, sufferings, sorrows, or hardships we face. This simple truth and promise is still the key to our joy today.

We live under the King's protection. That may not seem all that impressive to us because we aren't familiar with monarchies, but to the people of Zephaniah's day it meant everything. Remember the truth: You only go as far as your King takes you. We are saved. "Rejoice," the prophet tells us, because the hand our King lays on us is not the fist of an oppressor, but the open hand of forgiveness and blessing.

He has taken away our punishment - personally. He has the victor's power to win the battle against any oppressor that may threaten us - even death. We are safe. In ancient days, great walls would be built around large cities. Whenever an attacker came, and they often did, the people who lived and worked outside would rush behind the fortified walls for protection. All of our enemies - sin, suffering, and Satan - are powerless against the fortified strength and grace of our King. We are told not to fear any harm. Fear immobilizes. It takes away our strength and courage to the point that our text says, "our hands hang limp." Our King quiets our fears with His love. Our fears are totally satisfied, and being completely content, we find absolute rest and lasting joy.

God's gift of joy is not just for us - but for us to share with others.

A pastor was preparing his sermon. His little daughter came in and said, "Daddy, can we play?" He answered, "I'm awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I'm right in the middle of preparing my sermon. In about an hour I can play." "Okay, but when you're finished, Daddy, I am going to give you a big hug." She went to the door and then she did a U-turn and came back and gave her daddy a bone-breaking hug. He said to her, "Darling, you said you were going to give me a hug after I finished." She answered, "I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to." The Third Sunday in Advent, our God is embracing us with His Word. He wants us to know what we have to look forward to.

I recently read about a synagogue where the Rabbi danced with the Torah, holding it close to him, in front of the congregation over the words of God to Moses at Sinai. His remark was, "I wonder if Gentiles ever danced with their Bible?" **Have you ever danced with your Bible?** Advent is the time. Take home this gift with you today: a picture of God singing over you with joy; the truth of a God who'll do whatever it takes to win you and preserve you in His grace; the blessing of a God who rejoices that the lost has been found because we have repented of our sin and believe in His Son as our Savior.

Just as the angels sing in God's presence, do you hear God singing? He is singing and rejoicing over YOU. If we have ever been given a reason to dance with our Bibles - it is found in the joyous picture of our God singing over us. This is no time to let our hands hang limp. God is rejoicing over us repentant sinners, so how much more should our lives be a witness of rejoicing

in response to God's Good News of Salvation. Rejoice! I say it again, Rejoice! Talk about absolute euphoria! No one, no thing, no circumstance can ever take this joy from you.

The Psalmist of Psalm 85 is writing as God's people are returning from captivity in Babylon. Their hearts were filled with fear from their enemies, opposition to rebuilding the city, along with all the other fears of returning to a home that has been destroyed. But the Psalmist points them to fear, love and trust in the God of their salvation. *"Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him, that glory may dwell in our land."* (vs. 9) This season of Advent is a time to prepare for Jesus to come. Without Christ's intervention and incarnation, we would be lost in sin, death and torment forever. We approach God in reverence, mindful of how unworthy we are to be in His presence. But God advents to the world, to YOU, to bring His salvation and joy. You and I need His advent. The world around us urgently needs His advent. The people of Oxford need His advent. Who, in your mission field, needs His advent and His lasting joy? His advent replaces our fears with complete trust in Him and the joy of our salvation. The Lord is near.

The Lord is near YOU. What an awesome greeting for this and every week. Please pray about sharing this greeting with those around you this week – at work, in your bowling league or your small group. Your English District Evangelization Team would be pleased to hear what response you receive from this greeting. Does it lead to conversation about what His presence means? Does it lead you to "Listen, Ask, Seek, Share, Invite, Encourage" with others? Send us a quick note at this email: evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org I pray that you have a great week sharing the joy and euphoria over God rejoicing over you, His presence and the gift of a true lasting joy.

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20