

Rejoice! Live in God's Joy Today

Pastor Chip Fisher
Isaiah 61:1-10

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Advent is supposed to be a joyful season of preparing and waiting. You may have noticed the pink candle, traditionally featured on this third Sunday of Lent. (A bit of symbolic joy, the pink, in the midst of the purple as we prepare for the coming of the King. A bit of light in the darkness as we await the birth of the Savior.)

Some of us got a head start to being joyful during the Christmas season. Most of my Christmas memories growing up were happy ones. Just after Thanksgiving, we'd all pile in the car and drive down to chop down our Christmas tree. We'd make a day of it. The electric train would come out just this one time of the year. Mom would read us Christmas stories and dad would put on the Christmas records. (Since we often went to midnight Mass together on Christmas Eve, even us kids, there was usually some crankiness on Christmas morning when we'd open our presents, but generally I have very nice memories.)

For many, though, Advent is a hard time to be joyful. Dad took off, or someone was always drinking—somehow that stress was always there, and the Christmas season only made things worse. (Maybe you never particularly celebrated Christmas in any fashion.) And for many people today Advent is still painful. Maybe you just don't feel like celebrating this year. Maybe you're just feeling lonely. Maybe you feel like some of those mentioned in today's lesson: maybe you're feeling oppressed by circumstances you cannot change, or you've lost someone dear to you and you feel broken-hearted. Maybe you feel secretly imprisoned—by the life you have created, or by your own habits or addiction.

Rejoice? Live in God's joy, today? Advent is risky: what if joy does not come? What if you do not feel up to the effort today?

Is it really possible for people like you and me—maybe we who do not feel like we're at the head of the spiritual class—to rejoice, to live in the joy of the Lord, today?

I To live in joy first assumes we know what it is. Do you know the difference between "joy" and "happiness?" "Happiness" comes from the root "hap" or "luck"—the same as "perhaps" or "happstance" or "mishap." Our happiness generally depends on things working out

favorably for us. We all know the things which help us feel happy: you check and the market's up and your IRA is soaring; the kids are all coming home for Christmas; your blood tests came back positive and you're "good to go"; you leave on a "to die for" vacation next week; you are enjoying your friendships and your basic needs are met. (George Burns noted, "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family—especially if they live in another city.")

This "happiness of pleasant circumstances" couldn't be what Isaiah has in mind, though. The people Israel are still uprooted and far from home, and separated from many of their loved ones. They are probably still over in Babylon against their will: no economic security; family relationships tenuous, no freedom to worship their God as they longed to do. It makes no sense for the prophet saying, "Keep waiting, keep hoping, and when the geopolitics straighten up and your overlords decide to be nice with you and you end up with economic prosperity and access to the temple again, then go ahead and be happy..." Isaiah is saying just the opposite: because God is going to do something new and unimagined, then live differently today. Do not wait until your circumstances happen to align as you think you'd like.

In contrast, "joy" is not a commodity we can produce or manufacture or buy or sell or seduce or steal. We cannot legislate for it; we cannot go to court to get it; we cannot vote it in or out. We cannot inherit it or earn it. Joy is risky! Joy is elusive!

Like any grace from God, we can only receive joy. We cannot achieve it. (We cannot tell joy, or any kind of grace, what to do, or when.) We can try to achieve contentment—put peace comes as a gift. We can cultivate optimism and a positive mindset—but hope comes as a gift. We can take medical precautions and try to be cured—but being healed (whatever becomes of our bad knee or hip or cancer) comes as a gift. We can try to be lovable, and charitable—but love comes as a gift. For that matter, so does life itself. Ever try to make yourself be born, or make your heart beat the next time?

Isaiah was right: "joy" can come no matter how our circumstances are today. Joy is as unpredictable as the One who supplies it; its timing not for us to determine. Isaiah might agree that "the only condition for joy is the presence of God." Joy can break out whenever and

wherever God is present—which means it can break out even in a bad economy, or when you're stuck far away from home and loved ones, or awaiting crucial surgery in a hospital room.

In fact, if joy is a type of grace from God, it can break out whether we expect it or not; whether we are aware of God or not. The Israelites were famous for taking their eyes off the God who had saved them out of Egypt and taking matters into their own hands. They were not famous for being totally obedient to God—yet they are encouraged to keep shouting for joy, living in joy, over what God is going to do for them. (As we heard this morning: “they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs” [v 7]. The people had not cleaned up their act, had not become a race of spiritual giants. Yet God's grace, God's joy, was going to come upon them—anyway. God's covenant faithfulness; God's love—not their deserving.) God created us for communion with Himself and therefore for joy; all the darkness in the world or even all the darkness within us will not be able to keep us away from that joy. No matter how desolate we feel, or spiritually unworthy, it's God's pleasure to reach us with joy.

Think of our trying to achieve happiness as a ladder we build and climb: we work hard, treat our friends right, care for our family, pray every day, reach out in kindness, save our money, stay healthy, love those around us, do everything right. We can climb this ladder til we're 100—make it our life's work—but all this is still no guarantee how things turn out or even how we will feel. (One cartoon shows a middle-aged husband sitting on the couch with his laptop, his wife next to him. “Marge, our mortgage is paid. We are fully insured. I'm president of the firm. The kids are OK. We're healthy. We have each other. It all equals happiness...” His wife has a perplexed look on her face. “Walter, could you run that by me just one more time?” Even happiness is not a slam dunk.)

But then there's a totally different ladder. Think of the ladder of God's joy reaching down to you from the heavens. Your own ladder will never overlap this one, however high you climb. God's ladder, like grace, comes freely down to you. It doesn't come when you feel your most deserving or most invincible. It doesn't come when you might welcome it most, need it most; it may not look at all like what you had been expecting; maybe not even feel much like joy at the beginning. (But God's ladder of joy is an escalator ascending up into the heavens.)

Happiness depends upon you, mostly. Joy depends upon God.

II Rejoice! Live in God's joy, today. It's not the same as happiness.

To live in God's joy does not mean living beyond trouble or struggle or pain. God's joy can reach us especially when we struggle and when we hurt. We live in an age driven by the desire for comfort and ease; for excitement and entertainment—we want to avoid troubles and struggle. But what if God's joy tends to fall upon us not when we are protected, in control, comfortable, amused? What if the secure, comfortable existence—as far as we can pull it off, anyway—leads not to joy but toward boredom and a sense of purposelessness and fragility? What if our desire first to be untroubled actually leads us to need distraction, to need artificial stimulation, and never to develop the kind of character or perseverance which allows us to experience, in a back-door sort of way, a sense of the presence of God and God's joy?

God's joy is not the absence of our pain and suffering—but comes right into the midst of our difficulty. God's joy may not always feel ecstatic—it may also result in a deep confidence and conviction that God is with you. Experiencing God's joy may be what allows you, over time, to sense God's abiding and overcoming Presence within you. To live in the darkness and exile and prison of your real lives and develop a sustaining confidence you are not struggling alone and you are not struggling in vain.

Isaiah wastes no time wishing the Israelites were in an easier place. He foresees they will grow strong: rather than become fragile saplings they will become “oaks of righteousness.” They will build up the ruins; they will repair the devastation. A confidence springs up in them not despite their misfortune but as a result of it. (They do not deserve this confidence, they do not create it—it comes because God is going to do something; it comes as grace. But they may experience their lives as joyful—not because they tend their fig trees untroubled in Zion but precisely because they have been knocked down and trampled upon and survived. And God is there.)

There's a quiet joy that settles in when you know deep down that you and the Holy Spirit can handle everything life brings you. (Think of this as a persevering, overcoming joy. There is no shortcut for gaining it. It comes with time, and experience; it comes when you have seen God does provide you strength and spirit to persevere and overcome. There are no 3-year-old “oaks of righteousness”. There comes a more quiet joy which trusts that God will see you through whatever circumstances may bring in the future. This is the joy of which the Paul—who knew a little bit about overcoming adversity, himself—wrote: “Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will

of God in Christ Jesus for you.” [1 Thessalonians 5:16]

This deep joy settles in not when things are going nicely—but when life is hard. Helen Keller, born blind and deaf, knew something about this kind of joy. She wrote, “Most people measure happiness in terms of physical pleasure and possession. But if happiness is so measured, then I who cannot hear or see have every reason to sit with folded hands in a corner and weep. So let one who is called “afflicted” rise up in gladness to testify to God’s goodness. The struggle of life is one of our greatest blessings. It makes us sensitive, patient, God-like. It teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of suffering. Such faith is not, for me, a cushion to fall back on. It is my working energy.”

The Holy Spirit of God can give you a sense of abiding joy—especially when you are afflicted, under pressure.

III Rejoice! Live in God’s joy today.

Live in God’s joy today because the Light has already come into the darkness. Jesus, “Emmanuel,” “God with us,” is the Source of the promise of joy.

Did you wonder, when you heard the first verse, who was speaking or who was the subject? “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me; the LORD has anointed Me/made Me the Messiah. He has sent Me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bring consolation to the broken-hearted, to tell the POWs they are free to go home and the prisoners they are free; to give everybody a fresh start and to comfort all who are heavy-laden.” [vv1-3]

You will not be surprised that this very lesson is the one Jesus chose for His very first sermon. (At least according to Luke: Jesus preached “This promise is fulfilled today, as you all sit listening in your pews. This Messiah which Isaiah promised—I am he.” [4:18]

Isaiah had kept telling those lonely, afflicted, heart-broken Israelites to rejoice, now, even as their circumstances remained so oppressive. God was going to do something new—God was going to transform His people and set them free through this Messiah—so they could greatly rejoice in the LORD...now!

In time, it was Jesus who came. Jesus came into an oppressive and unjust world—and He claims He did bring freedom, and release from prison. Just not the kind that people were looking for. Not the kind with iron bars: the kind which is harder to get out of: our own guilt, our own habits, our own hopelessness. [Jesus had no earthly authority to tell Caesar or even Herod to release literal prisoners, nor to demand Roman the generals release

POWs. He did not perform literal heart transplants—yet Jesus invited and empowered every person to live in freedom, to live in joy.]

But Jesus will never force us to become free. Jesus will never force anyone to walk out of their darkness and into His glorious light. Jesus will never confuse happiness for joy, and He never seemed to care much about being happy. (He was full of joy—but He didn’t care much about “happiness.” After all, Jesus had no home, no money, no spouse and kids, an estranged relationship to His family and no end to the heartache and the emotional anguish of knowing He would soon be disgraced and betrayed and die a violent and agonizing death. Not “happy” as the world counts happiness.

Yet Jesus attracted friends and followers as no one ever has before or since. Yes, He was a man of great sorrow—He cared and loved so deeply. At the same time He promised His followers a great share in His joy. He was exuberant; He loved His friends. He delighted in the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. He loved His Father in heaven. His joy was to live a life of obedience and purpose. He promised us, His followers, “I am telling you these things—to obey the Father’s commands—in order that My joy may be complete in you all...” Even when Jesus knew He would be laying His life down for His friends, He promised to share His joy with every blessed person who will follow Him. His joy, like Isaiah’s, was rooted in God’s sure promise and God’s sure future. The Father did raise Him up!

And He lived in joy each day because He trusted the end of His life was not up for grabs any more than the end of the world is up for grabs. Sure—there’s always this interval. You and I are now living in this interval: you have begun to trust in Jesus (maybe a little bit, casually; maybe for a lifetime...but there’s always this interval...) He lived His life in joy even before He was put to death—before He felt God-forsaken. Big, big trouble came. But it didn’t stop Him living every moment in joy. He promised His joy to His A-team disciples the night before He went to the cross. And before they felt any joy they felt defeat, disappointment, despair. They felt alone, they felt lost. Every single one had deserted Him. I’m sure they felt they were anything but Jesus’ A-team.

Before they felt any of His joy they felt impatience, and fear, and cowardice. Only after the interval did His joy settle into them, as grace from above. They were given new attitudes and new lives; they were set free and their heavy hearts made whole.

So if you are not feeling the joy of the Lord, remember the interval. Don’t worry about whether you feel happy

or not. Don't think there's something wrong with you. In the meantime, be patient; persevere in your faithfulness. Look up. Love one another. Keep your heart open to the restoring love of God. Your trust and perseverance and love are as certain marks that you belong to Him as a sense of His joy. Never mind how long the interval lasts. The sun always comes up; it always drives away the dark of night.

Do you sometimes feel you are not up to the rigors of the spiritual life? You are not a gold-star student of Jesus, perfect in your prayer life and Bible study and tithing? Sometimes you're just not very diligent? Sometimes, in fact, you feel more lonely and defeated and broken-hearted than you feel strong—more a slacker than a saint?

Then this lesson is good news is for you.

If you find Advent is risky or painful; if you're not in the mood for Christmas, this poem from Ann Weems ("Kneeling in Bethlehem") is for you.

"Not celebrate?

Your burden is too great to bear?

Your loneliness is intensified during the season?

Your tears seem to have no end?

Not celebrate?

You should lead the celebration!

You should run through the streets to ring the bells and sing the loudest!

You should fling the tinsel on the tree,

And open your house to your neighbors

And call them in to dance!

For it is you above all others

Who know the joy of Advent.

It is unto you that a Savior is born this day.

One who comes to lift your burdens from your shoulders

One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes.

You are not alone

For He is born this day to you."

Isaiah 61:1-10

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display His glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation..."