

Advent: Joy (2)

Alexander Neider / General

Luke 2:8–12 (ESV)

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Introduction

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!(Phil 4.4)” So says the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

The circumstances of this letter are well-known: A founding pastor, now in prison, chained to a Roman guard,

facing the prospect of being executed by the empire. Written to a small church under persecution from their own city because they have declared, “Jesus is Lord and King, Caesar is not.”

In the midst of imprisonment, persecution, imminent death, and likely discouragement, Paul writes, “**Rejoice in the Lord always... Rejoice!(Phil 4.4)**”

During the Advent season, the church celebrates the coming of Jesus, the Messiah of the world. His birth was no ordinary birth, his life was no ordinary life, and his death was certainly no ordinary death.

Wrapped up in the person of Jesus is this reality that we call joy. This season is described as a season of joy because, for the church, true joy is found in the Christ. Paul indicates in his letter to the Philippians that they ought to live in this reality of joy not based on their circumstances but based on something entirely different. He encourages them to press on with perseverance, trusting that God will complete his work in them.

It has been said that “Familiarity [leads] to unfamiliarity, unfamiliarity [leads] to contempt, and contempt [leads] to profound ignorance”(Willard). This is true not only of the Christmas season but, more specifically, of the topic of joy.

Joy is often seen as an experience dependent on our ability to control our lives and the world around us. Joy becomes based on external circumstances going our way. We have bought into the thinking that if we can have a good life and consume what we want, we will

have found true joy. In a society obsessed with rights and freedom, we assume it is our right to live a life determined by our desires and our vision of what the good life is. Only then, we assume, can we experience joy.

However, the problem is that control is an illusion. **The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or a rift between old friends quickly shows us that no matter how much we think we deserve a painless life, external circumstances change and shift without our input.**

No matter how much we try, we can never fully control our lives. If joy is based on our ability to control, then we will be yearning and striving for a happiness that is unattainable for the rest of our lives. Joy, it would seem, cannot be based on the circumstances of our lives. Joy must be something else entirely.

In another letter of Paul's, one to the church in Rome, Paul would write, **“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14.17).”** The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are made part of, is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, that would also mean that joy is one of the key markers of the disciples of Jesus Christ: **to be the church is to be a joyful people.**

As the church, we must look past the shallow nature of our consuming world and instead search for the truth of the Kingdom of God in order to receive the gift of joy, for our

very character as the church depends upon it. We find these truths written to us in the form of a story: a story about Israel, their God, and Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel writer Luke introduces us to that story and invites us to be participants in it. **For Luke isn't writing just to tell a story... but to transform the way his readers see the world around them.**

The Joy of the Kingdom

Luke begins his gospel but opening with two prophetic songs. The first was sung by Mary, the mother of Jesus (1.46-55). The second is by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (1.67-79). Both songs have a dual purpose: **First, they declare Israel's hope that their God would be faithful to his covenant promises, and second, they describe or foreshadow the very essence of the life of Jesus.**

Mary declares the hope of the outcasts of Israel and their faith in the covenant God when she says, **“His mercy extends to those who fear him... He has performed mighty deeds with his arm... He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors”**([Lk 1.50-55](#)).

Zechariah echoes the same thoughts as he sings, **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to**

his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David... [to bring] salvation from our enemies... to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham... and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Lk 1.68-76).

Israel’s need for hope came from the fact that all was not well for the Jewish people.

The prophets of old had spoken of a day when God would restore and redeem Israel from their exile. After being exiled and brought to distant lands, they had returned to Israel, only to be ruled by the Empire of Rome. They had hoped that their return from exile would be the beginning of a covenant renewal with their God. **But their land was controlled by enemies, their temple was built by a false king, and not all Israelites were faithful to the ways of the covenant.**

Israelites longed to be true to the way of their God and waited for the day when his glory would descend on the temple like he did after King Solomon built it. They longed for the day when the promised land was purged from all those who opposed them. And they hoped for a day when the people of God would once again live rightfully according to the ways of the covenant.

It was this historical hope, this longing for God to move again, that Luke set the stage for Jesus. These songs point to Jesus and the nature of his life as if to tell Luke’s readers,

“Here is the answer to Israel's hope.”

It was also out of this hope that we can understand what Jews meant by phrases like **“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Is 12.3)**. **The salvation Israel longed for was to be once again part of the true Israel, the people of God. Their joy would be restored when God’s presence was with his people, and they were free from their enemies.** It was with this same understanding that David wrote, **“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”** While this Psalm was born in a moment of personal sin for David, it most certainly became a sort of national anthem of lament and forgiveness for the people of Israel while they were in exile. **Israel understood that the coming Kingdom of God would be one filled with joy because salvation had finally come to the people of God. It is this joy and salvation that Jesus came announcing as part of his Kingdom message.**

Jesus’s self-proclaimed mission statement was, **“I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God... because that is why I was sent” (Lk 4.43)**.

Echoing the words of Isaiah, **Jesus declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4.18-19)**.

Jesus saw that it was his divine role to usher in this

Kingdom of God, which was the grand return from exile longed for by Israel. **It was through Jesus that, once again, Israel would be the light to the nations and that God's joyful presence would be among his people. Luke shows us how Jesus began to usher in this kingdom through a battle with Satan, telling kingdom stories, casting out demons, sharing meals with sinners, healing all sorts of people, calling disciples, and teaching the way of the kingdom.**

The joy of the Lord was finally breaking through history. Redemption was happening. The people of God were being gathered together to experience the fullness of God's presence once again.

But less than halfway through Luke's narrative, Jesus begins to say some strange things in reference to his purpose and the nature of his Kingdom. **Three times, he predicts that his ministry will end not with a violent overthrow of the Roman empire but rather with his own death. The cross becomes the language Jesus uses to describe what following him will be like. Or said differently: the cross became the nature of his kingdom.**

Jesus is seen healing the servant of a Roman centurion, eating with the outcasts and traitors of Israel, describing this glorious kingdom of God as a small seed or a hidden treasure, and teaching his disciples to love their enemies. The Kingdom of God that Jesus was bringing was not like anything anyone expected.

In the same way, the joy of the coming Kingdom was not what his disciples expected either. They thought the joy of their salvation would come through Israel controlling their land once again, a violent overthrow of the powers that ruled them, and separation from all people deemed unclean. **But the joy of God's salvation would instead come through the suffering of the king. It was Jesus's suffering and weakness that would be the great victory over the true enemies of Israel and of the rest of the world.**

All of this comes to a moment in the story, a moment of **agony and distress. It is in this story that we, the church, get to understand the true joy of the Kingdom.**

The author of Hebrews says, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame" ([Hebrews 12.2](#)). The

author of Hebrews knows, just as Paul did in his letter to the Philippians, **that when the church looks at Jesus, we can see what it means to live in the joy of the Kingdom.**

If Jesus came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, then he was the fullest embodiment of that Kingdom. **It is in Jesus's darkest moment, his prayer in the garden of Gathseneme, that we, as the church, can see what it means to have joy in the midst of our trials.**

Jesus's Garden Joy

The 26th chapter of Matthew signals a transition in the life and ministry of Jesus by saying, "When Jesus had finished

saying *all these things.*” (Mat 26.1) Jesus has entered into a new chapter in his story. His ministry is no longer one of teaching, healings, and parables **but a divine ministry of self-giving love.**

After Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples and institutes the sacrament of communion, he takes his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. This place must have been a well-known spot for Jesus and his disciples, for Judas knew precisely where he would be. A garden of olive trees, just outside the city with a view of the temple, made a beautiful place to pray, and Jesus asked his disciples to pray for him as he went off. With Peter, James, and John with him, Jesus declared, “*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.*” (Mat 26.38).

Very rarely is this moment of Jesus’s life examined for the topic of joy. One would think that being overwhelmed and sorrowful to the point of death was, in fact, the exact opposite of a joyful life. Many times, this passage is read to meditate on the great theological ideas of Jesus being fully God and fully man and experiencing a profound sense of isolation. Other times, this passage is depicted as a model for prayer, always striving to want the will of our Father. These are important questions to ask, to be very sure, but at this moment, I want to ask another question.

If Jesus is the full embodiment of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom that enables people to experience the joys of God’s presence, how did Jesus live in a joyful reality while

embarking on the most painful moments of his life?

This is no small question. **We Christians often assume that we are entitled to a life without pain, for we are on the side of light. But when pain arrives at our doorstep, we struggle to comprehend how to live joyfully in the midst of our circumstances and conditions. We tell ourselves sometimes: “Just choose joy.” Good advice, but often really difficult to comprehend. The emotions we feel that are connected to the experiences we have are not easily turned off, as if we have some inner switch that can be flipped from anxiety to happiness. The joyful life we all long for seems to be on the other side of the dark cavern of our circumstances.**

The question of how Jesus lived out these last hours of his life is important because Jesus provides us with an example of what it means to be truly human. His life was a revelation of both God and bearing God’s image as humanity. It is in his struggles that we can learn what it means to have joy in all circumstances.

Matthew says, “Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may

your will be done.” When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Joy cannot be the absence of suffering. Joy cannot be determined by external circumstances.

Jesus did not pretend that he was happy that he was going to endure the cross. In fact, Jesus vulnerably admitted his sorrow and anxiety to both God and his companions. **It would seem that his suffering was essential for true joy to be found.**

The joy set before Jesus was the ability to see God working and moving in his sufferings rather than in spite of them. It was joy that enabled Jesus to confidently walk to the cross because death was not the end but the beginning of a great victory. Jesus saw the world for what it truly was. He saw that through his own weakness, pain, and ultimately, his death would be the fulfillment of all God’s promises. Jesus reveals a God who is not like the nations of the world that seek to rule and reign through force and control, but a God who would go to the greatest lengths to restore his creation to its intended purpose. The joy of the Kingdom of God is not a reality void of suffering. Instead, joy is, in fact, learned through suffering, for it is through his suffering

that we are unified with God.

The prayer in the garden shows that it is union with God that produces a life of joy, not the circumstances in our lives. Jesus chose to pray in these last moments not because prayer was going to get him out of the circumstances but because, in prayer, we can be the most vulnerable before God. Joy is not dependent on the issues and circumstances of our lives but on our ability to choose to see God's purposes throughout it all.

Believing is Seeing

We, as the church, know how the story goes. Jesus is brutally executed at the hands of Rome, and the Kingdom of God is thought to be a failed revolution. **But the story instead ends with Jesus being raised from the dead, the first of the new creation. Life given to the King, victory confirmed, and a people created of those who are made participants in his life.**

Luke's assumption is that in his account of the life and person of Jesus, he is doing more than just writing down a disconnected historical account of an important person in the first century. No, **Luke knows that it is his task to witness to "God's desire to save all of creation through the life of Jesus Christ."**(Hauerwas)

This Gospel account is not meant to give the reader some new information or philosophy for them to think about and make a decision to take it or leave it. **Luke's aim is to completely transform the way the reader understands**

the world around them in light of his gospel. Luke's task is to show us how the world is a much different place because of Jesus of Nazareth. Put in the simplest of terms: Luke is teaching us what it means to believe.

To quote one of the greatest theologians of this century: "Believing means being made participants in a way of life unintelligible if Jesus is not our Lord and God." (Hauerwas)

Being participants in this Kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ allows us to understand that our lives have an incredible purpose. We are made to worship Jesus. We are no longer bound to the lucky draw of a good life or bad life, for we have been given a life that does not depend on anything else but our union with Christ and our conversion into his body we call the church. It is in this life that we get to witness to the Kingdom realities Jesus ushers into all of creation.

And this, my brothers and sisters, is what joy is:

Joy is the way of seeing everything in our lives as in Jesus Christ and part of our union with him. Joy is a reality that comes to the church when they are trained to see the circumstances they go through as the means God uses to conform them into the image of Jesus Christ. Joy is a trust that no matter what we may go through in this moment of time, God will have the last word. Joy could never be the absence of pain or suffering because it is in these places that the church is able to see the faithfulness of God in the darkness. Joy is the gift of seeing.

The church trained to see is a church who is made a

participant in the way of Jesus.

- When the church sees rightly, she becomes a people who reconcile with others because by this everyone will know that we are Jesus's disciples.

- When the church sees rightly, she is a people who choose to love her enemies, for it is God who causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

- When the church sees rightly, she takes care of widows and orphans, for the LORD is righteous, and he loves justice.

- When the church sees rightly, she can experience joy in the midst of her sufferings because she considers it pure joy whenever she faces trials of many kinds because she knows that the testing of her faith produces perseverance. We began with the letter to the Philippians, and it is fitting that we return to it. Before Paul says to rejoice, he says this: **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead”**([Phil 3.10](#)).

For Paul, the joy of the Gospel of the Kingdom, his message to this church, comes through union with Jesus. Union with his way of life, union in his sufferings, and ultimately union in his resurrection. Paul's trials, and the trials of the Philippians, were not roadblocks keeping them from the life they had a right to in Christ. No, the trials they were facing were part of being in Christ and being participants in

his sufferings. Only through this type of union can the church truly call themselves disciples of Jesus. We are Christians, which means we worship a crucified God– and that takes some getting used to.(Hauerwas) **The beauty is that it is in our worship of and participation with our crucified Lord that we can truly find joy.** “Although the sufferings in the present may be severe, they are not the last word.”(Hunsinger) Joy allows us to see our lives as unified with God himself and experience the fullness of his glory and grace. Joy is the gift of being able to see.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the joy we all so desperately long for is not a joy that comes from a painless life. Joy does not come to a church that is just another consumer-oriented organization that encourages individual fulfillment; instead, it comes to a church that is unified and that worships Jesus Christ.

Joy does not come from us controlling our lives, for to be a disciple of Jesus means to learn to live without control. The joyful lives we all long for only come through union with Christ and unity with the church, his bride. The church must be a place where individuals are baptized into a body. The church must be a place where suffering and pain are carried together rather than alone.

The church must be a place where we are trained to see our lives as completely transformed by Jesus.

We are the church of Jesus, the people of the king. The

joy that was set before him is the joy that we have been called to embody: A living witness that we serve a loving God who, no matter our circumstances, will always have the last word. We can have joy because we are loved by the God of all creation, revealed through Jesus Christ.

And to that we say, come Holy Spirit, train us how to see rightly; to see everything as changed by the life of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Meditation

Psalm 126:1-6 NIV

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

² Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.