May you be blessed with joy at the coming of our Saviour!

*In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

 Luke 2:8-11

In this season leading up to Christmas that we call advent, we call to mind the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We think about His first coming as a babe in a manger and also His second coming in power and glory, which is yet to come.

In this beloved account, Luke tells us of an announcement that was made to some Israelite shepherds. Because of their occupation, they likely missed many Sabbath day gatherings in the Synagogues; but they would have still been aware that the Old Testament declared that the true King of Israel was coming.

It had been 400 years since the last prophet spoke and was recorded in the Bible. Still Israel waited. Even though these men went about their everyday life, doing their work, providing for their families; it had to be in the back of their minds that a Saviour was prophesied and they wondered when He would come.

Suddenly, in the darkness of night, as they watched their sheep grazing or sleeping in the fields, an immense light shown around them and a supernatural herald was before them. This was no trite creature like we so often see in paintings or as statues. This was a powerful spirit being who appeared engulfed in the glory of God Himself. Small wonder they were terrified.

But the angel had an announcement, the one they had been waiting for, Jesus, the Christ, was here. God’s word had been fulfilled. And even though they didn’t fully understand the nature of the salvation that had arrived, they rejoiced.

There is joy in the knowledge that God the Son came to this earth and that He was the only One able to save us. He offers that joy to you. It is a gift; it is yours if you will accept it. Blessed be His name.

In Christ’s love

John

 12-11-22

Acts 5:40-41

Because today during our advent celebration we have lit the candle of joy, I wanted to consider the topic of joy in the Bible. In the Bible, the word “joy” and all its variants, such as joyful and joyous, appear 211 times. Joy is an important topic in the word of God.

Joy is associated with God. And the presence of joy is not related to circumstances. It is a state of mind; it is a deep-seated state of being. In our reading today, the apostles had just been chewed out, intimidated, and then flogged; a particularly painful form of beating. Yet they left the court rejoicing. They were joyful. How can this be?

Too often with the subject of joy we hear what’s called “Pollyanna in the pulpit”. The pastor stands before the congregation and tells them how everything is wonderful. All we have to do is smile and believe in Jesus and everything will be fine. It’s easy to be joyful.

Well, the reality is that very often, life stinks. We are constantly under some form of suffering: beloved spouses or children die, we receive an unwanted diagnosis or are just sick, we have financial issues, the list of difficulties is seemingly endless. This is not to mention that we live in the valley of the shadow of death. No matter how much we ignore it, we all face death one day.

Yet the Bible talks about joy. How do we reconcile this? First, let’s consider what it is that makes it difficult for us to be joyful. It is sin. Sin is also important in the Bible. While joy is mentioned 211 times, sin is mentioned 1,176 times. Sin is not to be taken lightly. It is both our own sin and the power of sin in the world, that makes our joy difficult.

In Genesis, it is clear that God’s original design for the world was for peace and joy; both of which came from communion with Him. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, sin came into the world and the communion with God was broken.

The LORD God said to Adam: “*Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.*” (Gen 3:17b-19)

What the LORD said here is literal. Anyone who has grown a garden knows how much work it is and how the weeds run rampant. God formed man from the dust of the ground and once we die, with time, our bodies become dust once again. But what is said here is also metaphorical of life now that sin has entered the world. Everything we do seems to bring about toil, we face the weeds of disappointment, and the thorns of suffering. We know that death awaits. Yet, the Bible calls us to joy.

What we learn from this short account of the apostles and the beating they received is that our joy does not depend on our circumstances. The apostles were still in pain. It likely took weeks for the effects of the flogging to wear off. They would have always born the scars and it is possible that they retained life-long effects from what they went through. At this point, they could have focused on their pain and humility. This would have driven them either into anger or despair. Instead, they focused on Jesus Christ; and that is the key to their rejoicing.

The Bible talks about joy for two different times. There is joy available for us now in this life, and there is joy promised to us in the next. The two are very closely related since the joy we are promised is a reason for joy now.

We should consider where joy comes from. Joy is something that everyone seeks in one way or another. For the Christian, it is easy to look around at the world and see all the places others seek joy; all the wrong places: drugs and alcohol, sex, status, wealth; just to name a few. A sad note is that many Christians seek joy in worldly things also. This comes from focusing on this life and world instead of Jesus and the world to come.

Again there is a balance here. The Lord made this world good. There are good things in this life that bring us an earthly joy; the Lord provides goodness for us that we may rejoice and give Him thanks. But the good things of this earth are fleeting and transitory; they may give us a temporary happiness or an emotional burst of joy, but they will not lead to that deep seated unshakeable joy that comes to perfection in eternity with Christ.

True joy, such as we are speaking of, comes only from God Himself, through the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22 tells us what we reap from His indwelling in our lives; and one of those benefits is joy. In the same way that we can receive peace that is beyond understanding, we can have joy that is beyond understanding. They are beyond the understanding of the world; something that non-believers cannot attain.

Further, that joy has real-world benefit. Nehemiah 8:10 tells us, “*the joy of the Lord is your strength.*” How does a Christian have the ability to praise God in the face of trouble? It is because of the emotional strength of joy that is given by the Holy Spirit. This is the only explanation for the martyrs who were able to face painful death while singing hymns to God.

Even in the face of tragedy the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to have joy. The joy is there through tears and pain, through material and emotional loss, through whatever the Lord allows to come into your life. The actual joy is supernatural; it is not something we are able to accomplish through shear will or positive attitude. But we do have our part to play. The Holy Spirit brings our joy and comfort through the word of God and closeness to Jesus. We need to read and study our Bibles and pray. Our joy in difficulty comes through God’s promises.

The apostles rejoice that they had been considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ. They knew what we call Matthew 5:10-12; “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” They experienced supernatural joy because they knew that they would receive a reward in eternity.

We face many difficulties in this life, but we can face them with a sure hope and even joy, because of what we are looking forward to. As Paul tells us in Romans 8:18, “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*” What a beautiful promise to cling to. I know that most of us here have experienced great suffering, sadness, and loss. How unimaginably wonderful heaven must be if we will no longer even consider what we went through here.

Most important is our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who should be our example in everything. We read in Hebrews 12:2; “*fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

We fix our eyes on Jesus; He is to be our focus. We dwell on all He said and who He is. We meditate on His powerful name. In all these things we consider that we deserve no good thing from God, yet Jesus endured the punishment that we deserve. He has offered us eternal life and made the way for us to attain it. When we think on Him and on our sin, we come to realize that there is no reason we shouldn’t suffer in this life. How blessed we are that we can be saved, what joy this will well up inside us.

Jesus is also the author and perfecter of faith. Not only did Jesus pay for our sins, but He sent the Holy Spirit who gives us the faith to accept this gift. It is the Holy Spirit who shines the light on our need for a Saviour, then gives us the ability to accept Christ. If we accept Jesus, then He will perfect our faith. This is called sanctification and is a life-long process. As sanctification takes place, our faith grows stronger and with it, our ability to have joy.

As always with our amazing God, we have an unexpected connection here. That very suffering in which we are blessed to have joy, is the usual means by which we are sanctified. And through sanctification, our faith increases, and with it, our joy. We are familiar with James 1 verse 2: *Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials*. That is impossible for us by ourselves, but the indwelling Holy Spirit makes it possible for our good.

Again, a balance and understanding are necessary here. Our joy is not in the trouble itself. We are not called to be happy about suffering. Suffering is the result of sin and evil. We don’t go looking for ways to cause ourselves to suffer. But, to God’s glory, He is able to bring all things to good for those who love Him and are called to His purpose.

When we face suffering, we are to look for ways to alleviate it. If we are sick, we go to the doctor. We offer up prayers to God that He would see fit to remove whatever is causing us the distress. As Jesus taught us, we ask and keep on asking. In addition to these things, we continue to praise God with thanksgiving. We praise Him because He knows best and will use what we are going through to bring Himself glory. We thank Him because we believe His promise to work our situation to our good.

Going back to our reading from Hebrews, we see that Jesus endured the terrible pain of the cross; the humiliating execution; because He believed that God would reward Him with joy. And indeed, Jesus now sits at the right hand of God, the ultimate place of honor in heaven. What joy that must be to be in the continual presence of the glorious God of all things. Even here, Jesus continues His duties as high priest, interceding on behalf of we who are saved through Him. He has more reward coming. He will receive a Kingdom and all His enemies will be placed under His feet.

Let us be like our Master. Let us suffer in the joy of knowing that we have unimaginable reward awaiting us. We will be in the presence of God, we will rule with Christ, and our ultimate enemies of sin and death and satan will be forever cast away from us. Focus on Jesus and the life to come with Him. Let the Holy Spirit provide the life-giving joy He offers. Because Jesus is coming back.

*You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
 In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.* (Psalm 16:11)

Prayer

Blessed Father, true joy is not something that comes naturally to us in our fallen state. While You bless all people with occurrences of emotional joy, deep seated joy can only come from communion with You. The intimate relationship You first established with Your creation has been broken by our sin and rebellion. The Holy Spirit has opened our eyes that we may see how destitute we are, and that any attempt we make for our own joy is shallow and falls short of joy in You.

We thank You Lord, that in Your great mercy, You have made a way for us to return to communion with You. Jesus Christ has paid the price for our transgressions and imparted to us His righteousness. By these things we are cleansed and able to come into Your presence. We bless You for what You have done, for there is no other way than Jesus.

We offer You thanksgiving, that we are able to have joy, even in dark times of our lives. We experience sadness and fear and pain, all realities in this life; but we have that steadfast knowledge of Your sovereign hand guiding all things; both for the good of Your children and for Your glory. So, we ask You, Holy Spirit, for that wondrous fruit of joy. And may that fruit of joy bring glory to our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

For it is in His name we pray

Amen