

“Joy is the True Gift of Christmas”

Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46b-55

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Last Sunday, we reflected on John the Baptist’s prophetic voice. He challenged us to prepare the way for the coming Lord by revisiting our old spiritual habits and changing our hearts and minds. He demands us to find a new way for our lives. What do we do after we clear the path of our hearts? That is something we are anticipating and longing for accepting in this special season of Advent. That’s Jesus Christ, our Lord! And he is truly coming towards us in the birth of the baby. What does it mean that we wait for the birth of baby Jesus instead of grown up Jesus? Every baby is truly a blessing, mysterious and precious gift of God. Baby Jesus is the true gift and essential meaning of Christmas. This morning, I invite all of us to reflect upon the meaning of the gift of joy, especially on the third Sunday of Advent.

Last week, I had a chance to talk with one of our church members about the meaning of Christmas. She shared that Christmas is not Jesus’ birthday that we anticipate to return every year wishing for birthday gifts. Rather she argues that it should be focused on the birth of Jesus itself. This made me think about the essential meaning of Christmas and its spiritual point. If you haven’t thought about this question, I challenge you to take this question for your Advent reflection. What is the difference between a birthday gift and the birth of Jesus? The experience of joy is the key word that makes clear distinction in between. Simply speaking, a birthday party brings us a happy feeling and contentment by the assistance of objects such as toys and gifts. It is still a conditioned feeling by objects, but joy is permanent and dwells in our hearts.

Here is an example between pleasure and joy. On my first son Jacob’s birthday, his brother wasn’t happy. He refused to say, “Happy birthday” to his brother because he was jealous of his brother. When Jacob proudly told Joshua that his birthday was coming, Joshua loudly spoke to his brother, “My birthday is coming first!” Actually his birthday is still far away in February. Simply he was jealous of all people’s attentions and gifts. As a parent, it doesn’t matter whose birthday was coming first or next, their existence itself is just joy itself. In spiritual sense, our pleasure lasts as long as objects such as food, and other sources of pleasure continue to be provided, but joy is different. Pleasure is fleeting when objects and conditions are gone, but the joy, once we experience it in our hearts, will remain in us forever. C.S Lewis, a well known Christian advocate says, “Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”

Therefore we are anticipating and longing for this special gift of joy in this season of Advent. How can we find and receive this wonderful gift of joy in the baby Jesus? Both of our Scripture readings commonly describe the wonder of joy when we have it in us:

Isaiah 35:1-2: “The dessert and the dry land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. They will burst into bloom, and rejoice with joy and singing.”

Luke 1:46-49: “With all my heart, I glorify the Lord. In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me.”
(NRSV)

The gift of joy has magical power to transform our dried hearts into joyful souls so that our hearts will rejoice and sing no matter what our situations are. When we have joy in our hearts, no matter who we are, we can glorify the Lord because God is our joy and strength. Without joy, there is no Christmas. It means nothing. God is the true source of lasting joy and it is indeed a gift from God. This joy is only found in the birth of Jesus. God is incarnated in the human form and will be born in the small town of Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Joy is the true gift of Christmas!

Here is another question for your spiritual reflection. Why did God intend to send us the gift of joy in the birth of baby Jesus, not grown up Jesus? A baby is precious and nobody wants to argue the fact, but it is also true that not everybody finds joy in the baby. How do we understand the gift of joy in the birth story in the Christian tradition?

Jesus' birth is merely a way to deliver this whole point of Jesus' story. In Jesus' time, for those who followed Jesus and Jesus' disciples found the true gift of joy in Jesus' messages. They found the story of their master Jesus' birth story. But their memories and witness were different one from another. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, you will find a picture of three wise men. They are paying homage to the baby Jesus presenting their precious gifts. In the Gospel of Luke, instead of wise men, you will find shepherds running to see the new born king. In Mark and John, neither of these characters were even mentioned. But it doesn't matter. The more important and common ground of Christ followers was that the disciples' hearts were filled with joy and singing because of their Savior Jesus Christ.

The essence of the birth of Jesus' story is not in the point of who were there for baby Jesus, but in the news that Jesus was born to be the gift of true joy. Whoever heard this news rejoiced and couldn't stay where they were, but ran or traveled from faraway and adored the birth of the baby Jesus. Strictly speaking, it doesn't matter about the gender, racial or ethnic background. The more important point is that the essence of God was incarnated in the form of a baby and this baby brought us true joy. And how do we experience this joy as ours in the baby Jesus?

One irony is that we cannot create this gift of joy on our own, but we must receive from God. Then, how can we experience this special gift of joy? The secret key is "your experience of God". You need to acknowledge your empty spot in your soul and humbly ask God to come and fill that empty spot with this special gift of joy and let it dwell in you and guide your hearts. Invite Jesus to be born as let something wonderful begin in you in this season. It is truly mysterious how we receive the divine gift of joy in our hearts. **How can we accurately describe the mystery of God's gift of joy and grace in each of you?**

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) a scholar of comparative religion, argued that there is a common ground in every religion. He named this "Numinous". It has three spiritual components: fearful, fascinating and mysterious. He describes "numinous experience" in our real lives as follows:

It is to be found in strong, sudden ebullitions of personal piety ...It may be peaceful and come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship or faster moving: thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its profane, non-religious mood of everyday experience.. even leading to the **strangest excitements**.¹

John Wesley, our Methodism founder describes his personal and unique experience of God's presence in his diary. We call it "Aldersgate conversion". He wrote, "When I believed that God works in my heart, ***I felt my heart strangely warmed.***"

Whatever your spiritual experience with God falls on either like Rudolf Otto's expression, "strangest excitement" or John Wesley's experience, "strangely warmed heart", there is one basic requirement that we need to remember in order to experience mysterious presence of God and to receive

¹ <http://www.bytrentsacred.co.uk/index.php/rudolf-otto/the-idea-of-the-holy-1-summary> Accessed Dec. 11 2016

God's gift of joy. We must humbly acknowledge our empty spot that we cannot fill up with our human effort. Only God can fill it with joy and complete us! God sent His only son to help us. Accept Jesus and receive this joy for your desperate heart. I conclude my message sharing my follow up story of Joshua's birthday anecdote.

On the same day of Jacob's birthday, I bought Joshua a 24 piece animated character puzzle. He was super excited. He enthusiastically tried to complete the whole puzzle by himself. Finally he realized that he couldn't find the final piece. He started crying and asked for my help. I searched around him and found his final piece on the carpet near him. He joyfully finished the puzzle.

I imagined that the baby Jesus in this season is coming to us as a final piece of puzzle. We had trouble finding joy in our lives. Jesus is coming to us to complete and enrich our life with the gift of joy. This gift is not something else, but Jesus Christ himself. Let us open our hearts and anticipate this wonderful and true gift of Christmas. Joy is on the way. Amen.