



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 11, 2016  
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
COMPLETELY FOREVER: CHANGED BY THE COMING OF CHRIST

Completely Forever: Joy Unknown Before  
Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55

We have all seen those *National Geographic* type documentaries where a kind, resonate voice takes us on a tour of the desert Southwest. We scan miles of sand with rock formations that rise up like unclaimed monuments. When night falls and the air cools, we look closely to discover an abundance of creatures living in this arid land: snakes, scorpions, mice, rabbits, and birds which all manage to survive in the dry, hot environment. We find some plants huddled against the unrelenting sun, but most are scrub brush or dried up grasses. The camera locates a dry creek bed, empty watering holes, and caverns carved out by ancient and now extinct streams.

As we look at the tan, granular carpet of the desert, a spot appears on the sand, then another and another and another. The annual rain begins and soon, through the advantage of time-lapse photography, we watch creeks be born, see the watering holes fill, and the parched earth take a long, slow draw to quench its thirst. In almost no time at all, green appears, colorful flowers pop out, leaves grow, and with them the creatures emerge. They drink, they feast, they love, and they delight in the cycle that will end all-too-soon and send them back to their dens until the next rains come.

Isaiah must have found a vantage point from which to witness such a revival of the earth. "The wilderness and dry land shall be glad," he sang. "The desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing."

The rebirth of which he wrote was not caused by a spring rain, however; it was the result of a deluge of God's mercy because not only would the dry desert spring to life, but "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." He sang of the day of the Lord when God would rain mercy and justice on his people.

Experiences such as Isaiah described are certainly cause for celebration. Following a drought, flowers dance in the fresh fields. After long and deadly wars, neighbors celebrate in the streets. When a lost child is

located, when a new business is opened, when graduation finally takes place, and when a baby is born, to borrow Isaiah's words, we "shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." During the holiday season, we experience this kind of happiness over and over.

Mary's joy was different, I suspect. While she may have grown up playing with rag dolls, helping her mother with younger children, and dreaming about having her own family one day, the story Luke tells is not one of a young girl's dream come true. Had she, like Sarah, Hannah, or her cousin Elizabeth, prayed long years for a child who would not come, and then found out she was pregnant, there would certainly have been cause for celebration. As it was, Mary was a young maiden, closer to being a girl than a woman. She was unmarried and a virgin. Like a thunderstorm out of a clear blue sky, a messenger from God, a fellow named Gabriel, suddenly appeared and informed her that she was going to have a child. The surprised young woman was shocked. This news was not like rain after a drought, peace after war, or feast after famine. It was unbelievable, impossible, implausible—absurd!

Yet, Mary sings:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

It is not a boisterous song of celebration. It is a rather quiet hymn of trust and gratitude, but it is a song of rejoicing, nonetheless.

Mary's joy is different from that of Isaiah's. It emerges from beneath her, within her, filling all those crevices of doubt, soaking the parched valleys of fear, replenishing the dry riverbeds of hope. Mary's joy was deeper, broader, and cooler than that of Isaiah and his contemporaries. Mary's joy came directly from the One who stirred life within her. Her joy was not a reaction to a change in circumstances; it was an undergirding delight in God's presence in the world. When Christ comes into our world, into our lives, our joy changes from occasional gladness to continual delight.

Last week I had a conversation with someone in which the topic of this sermon came up. I thought his comments might be helpful and he gave me permission to share them with you.

When I told him I would be preaching on "Joy Sunday," he said, "I have reached one of those plateaus in life where I am not really happy. It is not that life is not good—overall it is. But aging has a way of reminding me day after day that the years are adding up quickly. Concerns—worries—about family never diminish and I find myself squeezed (or stretched) between caring for elderly parents and concern over adult children. I love my work, but it grows more challenging every day. After so many years, you would think it would be easier to get the work done, but there is always pressure to produce, to lower the bottom line, and to get better results."

He continued: "After this election, I am concerned about our country. The past eighteen months exposed the dark side of who we really are all the way around. The world seems to grow more violent, more secular, and angrier with each passing day. I cannot find many places for hope. So, the truth is, I am not very happy these days."

"Yet," he insisted, "there is within me, like a river running silently underground, an awareness of a joy that is not my own but which is lent to me unconditionally, for my benefit alone. It is the joy that comes from knowing that Jesus Christ lived the life I live, that he died, and that he cared enough about me to rise to new life so that I might have new life as well. Clearly, Jesus was not always happy, but he lived with a certain joy that comes through in his sermons, stories, teachings, and the way he engaged other people. That joy is especially evident in the garden and on the cross when pain, suffering, and agony were his alone. Nevertheless, he yielded his spirit to God in complete trust that it would not be lost but would continue and find new life. That same joy lifts me up even when I am not happy."

I would say that this fellow has been changed by the coming of Christ—completely forever.

Mother Teresa—now Saint Teresa—gave her life caring for the poor and sick in the slums of Calcutta. After her death, we discovered that her faith was punctuated with doubt, insecurity, unhappiness, and fear. Yet, her joy remained persistent. Writing about Mother Teresa, Edward Le Joly quoted her:

“The best way to show our gratitude to God and the people is to accept everything with joy . . . Never let anything so fill you with sorrow as to make you forget the joy of the Risen Christ . . . We all long for Heaven where God is, but we have it in our power to be in Heaven with him right now to be happy with him at this very moment. But being happy with him now means: loving as he loves; helping as he helps; giving as he gives; serving as he serves; rescuing as he rescues; being with him 24 hours a day; touching him in his distressing disguise in the poor and suffering . . . A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love. It is the gift of the Spirit, a share in the joy of Jesus, living in the soul.”<sup>1</sup>

The joy that comes from Christ is not necessarily giddy happiness; rather, it is more often an abiding confidence in the presence and power of God to change the world by changing the people of the world.

German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for eighteen months in Tegel, an interrogation prison. Under the harshest of conditions and with his life hanging in the balance, he nevertheless managed to smuggle out letters to other, younger pastors whom he mentored. His purpose was to guide and encourage them in the darkest days of Nazi domination. Bonhoeffer was eventually executed for his efforts to overthrow Hitler. In his final letter to his fellow pastors he wrote:

A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart’s pain, anguish, and dread; it does not last; it can only numb a person for the moment. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it.

What matters is this joy that has overcome. It alone is credible; it alone helps and heals . . . Full of joy, we are enabled to believe that there was and is One to whom no human suffering or sin is foreign and who in deepest love accomplished our

---

<sup>1</sup>Edward Le Joly, *Mother Teresa—Messenger of God’s Love*, (St. Paul Publications, 1983).

redemption. Only in such joy in Christ the Redeemer shall we be preserved from hardening ourselves where human suffering encounters us.<sup>2</sup>

We desperately want God to rush upon the world like a spring rain, quenching the parched earth and refreshing our arid souls. At times, God does move among us in that way. More often than not, however, God wells up within us—like a baby growing in his mother's womb—tiny, imperceptible, growing and developing. In the midst of morning sickness, fatigue, and all of the other challenges associated with being pregnant, a mother dwells in the joy of knowing new life is growing within her. There is birth and the gladness and joy that accompany it, then there is the day to day work of raising a child to adulthood. It is not always a happy time, but there remains a persistent joy.

One of the things we often hear and say at this time of year is, "I wish the Spirit of Christmas could last all year long." It can and it does. It is the undergirding joy of living as if God is with us—because God is. God's presence brings a change of heart, altered action, and new life.

The coming of Christ caused a young pregnant girl to rejoice. It caused a tired, middle-aged man to rejoice. It caused a tiny, determined nun to rejoice and a courageous German pastor to rejoice. The coming of Christ causes us to live with joy because the coming of Christ changes us forever . . . completely forever. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works, vol. 16, Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945* (Fortress, 2006), 377-378; as cited in Tony Reinke, "The Invincible, Irrefutable Joy," *DesiringGod.org* (December 12, 2012); available online at: <https://desiringGod.org>.

December 11, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who became flesh and dwelt among us, as the birth of our Savior draws near, we can rejoice in the faithfulness you have shown to your people throughout the ages. And yet, as we await Christ's coming once again, we continue to be surprised by the persistence of your love for us, by the abundance of your blessings to us, and by the extravagant demonstration of your grace in the sending of your Son. We give you thanks for the comfort we find in familiar words and music and in meaningful traditions. We give you thanks for the grace of family and friends, for memories shared and gifts given. Most of all, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son who comes to transform our hearts, to move us from our comfortable places, to renew our spirits, to change us completely, forever. In our gratitude, grant to us a spirit of generosity and compassion. Help us to share all that you have given to us and to remember that you are the source of all that we have and all that we are.

On this day when we have lit the candle called joy, we pray, Lord Jesus, that you would come to bring joy to our world. Bring joy to the one who has sung these carols for a lifetime and still sings them with heart and soul and voice. Bring joy to the child who comes with eyes wide and heart open. Bring joy to the one who needs to know that your love which embraces all the world is also particular enough to meet each grief and loss as though it were the only pain in the world. Bring joy to the hopeless ones who long for assurance of their worth and that someone cares for them when the world tosses them aside. Bring joy to those for whom the sounds of war have drowned out the melodies of carols. Bring joy to all of us who are caught up in the wonders of your love as though we were experiencing your birth for the first time. With all heaven and nature, let us sing and shout and speak our joy, that the dark places of the world might know that you have come. We pray in the name of the One who comes to bring us abundant and joyful life, and we offer our prayers by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister