



DISCIPLESHIP IN AN INSTANT SOCIETY SERMON SERIES:

Joy

I Peter 1:8-9; Psalm 126:1-6

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May 14, 2017

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There are days when rejoicing is easy. Joy seems to flow out of our fingertips, through our words and into our daily lives like water bubbling up in a fountain, and our job is just to get out of the way. Other days, anxiety, pressure and uncertainty seem to clog up our spiritual life, and that free-flowing joy encounters these feelings as immovable blockage.

During these times when our joy is stuck, we pause to remember that we can choose. Joy is not a momentary burst of emotion. Joy is a choice, a way of being, a defiant statement that grief and sadness do not have the final word; in the words of the psalm, “weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Today is Mother’s Day and on it I think of the mother of our Lord...Mary. Mary had a choice about how to respond to the angel’s news that she would soon be a mother. She could have run away to hide. She could have denied the truth of what God was saying to her. She could have said no. Mary chose to say yes and with that yes, to rejoice. When our spirits, like Mary’s, choose to rejoice in God our Savior, we are choosing the way of hope. We are choosing a way that might just seem contrary to the world around us.

It seems contrary because we inhabit a culture in which the loud motto seems to have become that we should get to do what we want, say what we want and get what we want by pursuing any means possible for personal fulfillment. After all, if God truly loves us, this is what God must want for us.

But actually, Friends, if we believe that Scripture is inspired by God, then God through inspired prophets and kings, priests and apostles, and through His Son, Jesus, actually has a lot to say about what He wants for us.

And it has little to do with doing whatever makes us feel most happy at any given moment.

Oh, God wants us to be happy, don’t get me wrong, just not with the earthly kind of happiness that fades as quickly as the spring flowers. God’s got eternal joy in mind, and if He created us, and we believe He did, then He knows better than anyone what it will take to bring us that joy. This is where spiritual disciplines come in.

Now if you’re unfamiliar with what I mean by this term, I’m referring to the long-practiced activities within the history of the church that are meant to help us experience and express God’s love. As a word “discipline” implies these aren’t things that come naturally, but instead involve resolve and choice.

All of us experience things that are full of sadness and pain. Some of us descend to low points in our lives when Joy seems to have permanently departed. We must not in such circumstances or during such times say, “Well, that’s the final proof that I am not a good Christian. Christians are supposed to be joyful and I’m not, therefore I must not be a Christian.”

Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence. It is not what we have to

acquire in order to experience life in Christ; it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of obedience.

We come again to God because none of us have it within ourselves, except momentarily, to be joyous. We try to get it other ways: We pay someone to make jokes, tell stories, perform dramatic actions, sing songs and make music. But if we're honest, we know that kind of joy doesn't truly penetrate our lives, doesn't change our basic constitution. The effects are temporary and when we run out of money or time, the joy seeps away. We cannot make ourselves joyful. Joy cannot be commanded, purchased or arranged.

But there is something we can do. We can do what the people who sang Psalm 126 did. We can decide to live in response to what God has done and what God will do. We can decide to live in the environment of the living God and not our own limited selves. We can decide to center ourselves in the God who generously gives and not in our own ability to acquire.

One of the certain consequences of such a life is joy, the kind expressed in this psalm.

Please look at it again with me. You'll notice that the psalm is broken into two sections. At the end of the first section, we find the center sentence in the psalm, "We are glad." (verse 3) The words on one side (verses 1-2) of that center verse are in the past tense, the words on the other side (verses 4-6) are in the future. "We are glad" is the present tense and the present moment. We can know joy when we remember present gladness has a past and a future. It is not some fleeting emotion. It is not a spurt of good feelings that comes when the weather and the kids and the stock market are all going right on the same day.

It is clear in Psalm 126 that those who sang it were not strangers to the dark side of things. They carried the painful memory of exile in their bones and the scars of oppression on their backs. They knew the deserts of the heart and the nights of weeping. They knew what it meant to sow in tears.

One of the most interesting and remarkable things that Christians learn is that laughter does not exclude weeping. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness of the redeemed.

A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt; get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends, get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks, get rid of disappointments by depersonalizing relationships. Then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of purchasing experiences or acquiring things. There isn't a hint of any of that in Psalm 126.

Laughter is the result of living in the midst of God's great works. Enjoyment is not an escape from boredom but a plunge by faith into God's work. There is plenty of suffering on both sides, past and future. The joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears and create a new future. Joy is what God gives, not what we work up. Laughter is the delight that God is in all things. It is so much more than the giggles that betray the nervousness of a precarious defense system. This joy that develops in the Christian way of discipleship is an overflow of spirit which comes from feeling good not about ourselves but about God.

This joy is not dependent on our good luck in escaping hardship. It is not dependent on our good health and avoiding pain. This joy is known in the midst of pain, suffering, loneliness and misfortune. This is what the Hebrews knew. This is what they sang to remember. May you, too, remember what God has done and what God will do so that today may be a day with joy.