

Advent 2017 - Joy

12/17/2017

Psalms 4:6-7

6 Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?" Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD. 7 You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. 8 I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, when we celebrate and ponder the miraculous nature of the joy.

Before I get started, I wanted to share something personal ... Trader Joe's has an item that I consider decadent, actually they have many things I love, but the one I am thinking about today is their Sour Cream. I could probably eat an entire container at one sitting.

I love cream... it is where the flavor is. And their Sour Cream has this wonderful layer of cream at the top.

Have you ever wondered why cream rises to the top of whole milk? Milk consists of about 87% water, and some minerals, lactose, proteins, and fat. The fat in milk is less dense, or lighter, than the water so it floats to the surface. This is the component of the milk that we call cream. Cream rises to the top because it is the lightest constituent in milk.

It is lighter, so it rises to the surface....

Sometimes our lives feel like cream: filled with flavor, wonder, and marvelously enjoyable; we feel light and carefree. When we experience fine health, worldly abundance and prosperity, close friends, meaningful relationships, loving families, and grand opportunities, it is natural to feel joy in life from our earthly fortune.

When we are filled with joy we are almost irresistible to other people. Mother Theresa of Calcutta said, “Joy is a net by which you can catch souls.” Everything is easier when we do them with joy.

Then there are times when challenges make our lives seem dense and weighty: the financial trials, emotional struggles, work stress, relationship issues, and physical challenges can so encumber our souls that we feel burdened and heavy laden.

At these times it is difficult to “look on the bright side”, and as long as we keep looking outward to the world for some sign of light, we can succumb to the growing darkness that our minds create.

It is at these times that the wisdom of Psalm 36:9 offers solace: *For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light shall we see light.*

Habakkuk, a lesser known prophet in the Bible, had such an experience. In Habakkuk 3:16-19 he responds to a vision he had by saying this: *16 I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. 17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.*

Habakkuk teaches us something of joy in these verses. Despite an impending invasion, despite the failure of their primary sources of food - figs, grapes, olives, and grains of the field - despite the lack of cattle and sheep, Habakkuk chooses to rejoice in the Lord. He chooses to look

passed the typical earthly sources for joy and light, and receive the light and joy of God.

At some point we must ask ourselves, “What is joy?” Joy can manifest in many forms: from giddiness and giggles to a solemn reverence. Although joy is akin to happiness, they are not the same. Biblical joy, spiritual joy, is a state of mind based upon something internal, not external. Joy is agreeable and comfortable; not something that happens to us from outside over which we have no control, but something that arises from within us and is not dependent on our circumstances of the time. It is not a short-term, changeable feeling, but a long-term decision.

Joy is more than a privilege to be hoped for, waited for, longed for; it is a duty to be performed. We are commanded to “rejoice in the Lord”. Joy is therefore a responsibility, an obligation to express.

Spiritual joy arises out of the holy peace from knowing who we are – a Child of God – and understanding that our Source is unlimited. There is no lack, no separation from Spirit. When we can release our dependency on the outer world, along with the doubts, desires, and fears that accompany that focus, then we experience the bounty of God – faith, expectancy, peace, and love; and by embracing these Godly attributes, thinking on them, allowing ourselves to be moved and influenced by them we experience joy, spiritual joy.

It is the joy of faith, of hope, of love, of peace—it is joy in God, and of the Christ.

Joy is the combining of peace and love, their synergy creating joy. Joy is more than peace; it is delight soaring toward ecstasy. It is more than love; it is adoration lifted to exaltation.

Depending upon our personalities, our joy takes greater or lesser forms of outward expression along the excitement scale. Spiritual joy is typically a calm serene bliss; an understated elation.

Habakkuk's joy arose from his faith, trust, and love in God. He made a conscious decision to rejoice in the Lord, he did not wait for conditions to improve or for some emotion over which he had no control to strike him.

I like how Habakkuk makes 'joy' an active verb. "I will joy in my Saving God." I will joy in God. I will be joy in God; I will experience, express, partake of, and completely be one with the joy of God. My being, my very essence is joy in God.

Habakkuk receives two powerful gifts as a result of the state of joy that he chooses: the first is strength. In Nehemiah 8:10 we are told that, "The joy of the Lord is our strength". Habakkuk received sufficient joy to see him through his difficulties, and enabled him to cope with his challenges.

This lesson from Habakkuk teaches us that although we cannot always eliminate the challenges of life, through God's gifts, including the gift of joy and the strength it provides, we can endure and overcome the obstacles we face.

The second gift Habakkuk received was that of confidence and surety of action. His feet become those of the deer or gazelle, which can run safely and surely among the rocks of the highlands, able to quickly and easily maneuver through the most difficult of situations and escape its enemies.

The difficulties that he encountered, and which still lay ahead of him had no power over him because he was focused on the joy of God.

Through joy he was transformed from a trembling and incapable individual into an empowered and victorious servant of God.

This is the lesson that the rebirthing of the Christ brings to each of us – that we, through joy, can be victorious over any adversity.

So why do we sometimes not exhibit the victorious joy of God? The reasons are many. One reason that I see in myself is that I don't focus on joy; I don't focus on God. It is so easy for me to focus on the challenges and be swept up in the morass of self-pity than to stand firm on the rock of joy and God's gifts.

There are times when I simply don't allow myself to feel joy. I think it inappropriate or I am too concerned with what others might think. I am afraid that I may appear foolish or misguided.

This is all ego-based thinking, and our ego will do its best to deprive us of joy and the strength derived from God's joy. That smallest part of us will tell ourselves that we are unworthy and not entitled to God's joy.

After all, how can someone feel joy amidst calamity and struggle? I think Habakkuk would answer, "How can you not?"

Said Helen Keller: "Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow."

It is God's pleasure to fill us with joy, and Jesus taught with the purpose of bringing us joy. In John 15:9-11 Jesus says, **9** *"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love ; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11*

"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

Maya Angelou said, "When you wish someone joy, you wish them peace, love, prosperity, happiness...all good things."

Many world religions embrace joy as a fundamental quality in life for which to strive. From The Buddhist holy scripture the Dhammapada:

"Live in joy, In love, Even among those who hate.

Live in joy, In health, Even among the afflicted.

Live in joy, In peace, Even among the troubled.

Look within. Be still. Free from fear and attachment,

Know the sweet joy of the way. "

From the Quran: Those who believe and do right: **Joy** is for them, and bliss (their) journey's end.

Jesuit Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said it so simply: "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God."

As Christmas approaches, let us continue to release the Hope, the Peace, the Joy and the Love of Christ. My prayer is that we can keep things light, keep our perspectives light, so that joy rises to the surface of our lives like the cream on milk. Joy is where the flavor is.

As this week progresses, may we find the time to be still and listen; listen to the awaiting Christ within; and as we raise our awareness we may hear the voice of God whispering to our hearts, "Rejoice always, and again, I say rejoice!"

Let us pray....