

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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What is the Meaning of Joy?

Joshua Symonette

{Singing} 'Tis the season to be jolly
Fa la la la la, la la la la {end singing}

For some reason, that song popped into my head as I was walking into Penn Station in Baltimore this week as I was thinking about what I would share. And, you know, it's a popular Christmas song. It is Christmas season, so it is appropriate. No doubt we're hearing Christmas songs and Christmas carols everywhere. We're seeing decorations and lights and ugly sweaters and cookies and cakes, eggnog, sales all over the place. And there's always a lot going on at Christmas. And some of us really, really, really, really, really get into it. Like the Gay family and Lagrangeville, New York. I saw a story where they have over 641,000 lights on their property. That's a Guinness world record by the way, for the most lights on a private property.

Then there are some of us on the opposite end of the spectrum who don't really get into it that much. Or we just kinda go through the motions and we're not really feeling it. You know, maybe there's a variety of different reasons for that. Some of it could just be a sense of separation from loved ones. Maybe that's because of a death or because of distance or because there's some relational tension. Then there's, you know, loneliness. I also saw this story or this article about how millennials tend to be twice as more lonely during the Christmas season than elderly people. I was very surprised by that.

And then there's just the general overall stress of the season. Like we just can't wait for it to be over because we just got too much stuff going on. Just cooking and traveling and family members, they get on your nerves or whatever the case may be. Maybe that's just your family. I love my family.

But when I think about it and I process all of that, 'Tis the season to be jolly, is that actually true? And if so, why? And if not, why not? What does it really mean? And I just want to spend a few moments this weekend unpacking that.

If you have a Bible, you can meet me in Luke chapter number two. And while you're going there, just a quick intro and backdrop leading up to what's happening in Luke chapter two. We back up just a little bit, Luke one, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her she's going to have a son. His name is Jesus. He's going to be the Son of the Most High God. And Mary is like, hold up bro. I don't know how that's going to happen, I'm a virgin. I have plans to be married to this guy, Joseph. He says, Hey, just, just hear what I hear me out. The Holy Spirit will come up upon you and you will conceive.

That's not what I'm focusing on this weekend. But every time I read that, is that not a wow story? I mean like think about it, like Mary is she's a young woman. I mean she's a teenager and her life is literally turned upside down in this moment. She goes from about to get married to this guy

Joseph, and then have kids to actually now about to have a kid before she gets married. And she's pregnant by the Holy Spirit. I mean, this is, this is kind of weird, right? But this coming of the Messiah had been prophesied for centuries and I'm a father of teenage girls and I'm thinking about their reactions to some of the things that I say. And here Mary is getting this prophecy from an angel and her response in verse 47 it says, she rejoiced. It says, "in God my Savior". Well, we'll come back to that in just a minute.

So we now move to Luke chapter number two. Jesus is born, like right at the beginning of chapter two. So we pick up the scene in verse number eight if you can follow along with me, there's an appearance of another angel. It says:

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. I bet they were. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

What I want to zoom in on for just a few moments in the rest of my time is this line that says, "*I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*"

And I want to use for a subject this weekend; what is the meaning of joy? What is the meaning of joy? I ask this question related to this line that I just read that the angel gave to the shepherds because this is a reference to a very popular song that we sing called, "Joy to the World". Now while we only really sing this song or think about this song during the Christmas season and then we lump it into all of the other Christmas stuff and consumeristic fanfare of Christmas and we say things in this season or this is the season to be jolly. And when you look up that word jolly Merriam Webster, it just means a good time. We equate joy in this season with festive cheer and gift giving. And that's cool. I mean, I like gifts, you know, I like to give gifts, but there is more. See, I think we need to be informed if we don't know or reminded if in case we have forgotten that this joy that is being spoken of here is a reference to the gift of Jesus. It's not about any of these other gifts that might've been good gifts or that are good gifts but only give us a temporary satisfaction. It's not that.

There's also a reference to good news and the King James Version of the Bible says "*great tidings of great joy*". It's coming to everyone. It said for all people, and this is a very, very interesting point here, because when the angel appears in the field, he's giving this message of joy to all people, to shepherds. These are the low ranking people in the society, in the culture. No one really wanted to do the shepherd's job. I mean, I have a little puppy and I don't want to pick up after my puppy, let alone do what shepherds do. But these were the low ranking people in, in the society. And so this message of joy to all people meant that your status didn't matter either.

In all of this context surrounding this message, this one line that we're talking about is very huge and significant for us to understand because the joy that the angel is talking about is not about good times. It's not about whether I am happy, it's not about if everything is going well or everything is going smooth. Neither is it about my sociological status, whether I'm single or married or I'm affluent or I'm just getting by. This is not what this joy is about.

I love to borrow a term from the great African American historian, Carter G. Woodson. He used this term called mis-education. And I want to borrow that term because I think we have a mis-education of joy. So we have a mis-education of joy, Pastor Joshua then educate us. What is it that we are missing? What is this angel referring to?

So glad that you asked because I'm going to tell you, I think there are quite a few terms that we could use to talk about this, but I love to distill them down to just two for you this weekend. Number one, I think joy is about anticipation. See, when I was growing up, I mean, I loved Christmas. I mean, I still love Christmas, but when I was growing up, I mean just this anticipation of unwrapping gifts was, it was crazy. I mean this joy just warmed my heart. Now, I didn't know if I was going to get the things that I was expecting, but I was just excited that I was going to get something. Like this anticipation and this hope that was connected to my joy of getting some gifts was something that I look forward to.

This was the same type of anticipation that the Jews lived in for centuries of the coming of the Messiah that was prophesied literally over and over again for centuries. Imagine if you lived in some kind of oppression. For me, sometimes that's just like, you know, maybe my little one's just calling my name over and over and over again, you know. I mean, that's not real oppression, but you know. But just imagine you lived under some serious oppression. Like you had some restrictions or there were different things that you were afraid of or different things that you couldn't do or just stuff that you were subjected to as a result of oppression. And you were anticipating one day being rescued, like, God, help me please. This is how the Jews regularly lived. I mean they lived under the oppression of Rome and others around them. Like they didn't eat, they didn't have, they didn't really have rights. Like they kind of had rankings among them and they had dignity among them. But, in the culture and in society they didn't. But despite their current condition, they tried to live with joy in their hearts, anticipating that this Messiah was going to come and restore everything and make everything well. So this joy that they speak of is not a circumstantial one, but it's one that's related to anticipating what is to come.

Secondly, I think joy is about assurance. So you've got this anticipation of what will come. But then I also think it's about assurance or security that things will be good. Notice I didn't say that things are good, but that things will be good because the current reality is not a determinant of joy. Unlike happiness, and I love what the award winning gospel artists, Kurt Franklin says about happiness. He says, that means you gotta have good stuff happening. But, this is not what I'm speaking of. Joy is the assurance that whatever state I am in, my confidence is not tied to my circumstance or my situation. But as it's my assurance in God, that somehow some way it will work out. So this is why Mary rejoiced not because her situation was great and you've got to understand that Mary, understanding that she was a woman did not have many rights and there were certain things that you had to do. So now she's breaking protocol because she's going to be seen as pregnant and she's promised to be married to this guy Joseph. I mean, this is problematic for a young woman. I mean, Joseph could have left her as a result. But even before Joseph promised to stay with her she rejoiced not because of her situation, but she rejoiced in God as her Savior.

You know this kind of assurance and confidence associated with joy is referenced throughout the New Testament. James 1:2 says,

² *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials...*"

I don't know about you, but when I'm facing trials, like my humanness comes out and counting it, joy is not the first thing usually that I'm thinking. I get there eventually, but I'm usually not counting it... That just sounds crazy to me. But there's this assurance that James refers to as he goes on. He talks about it producing perseverance and maturity in us. He's helping us that we can count it joy because there's something good that's gonna come about as a result.

Paul also mentions this in his letter a few different times to the Christians in Rome. Romans 15:13, he says,

¹³ *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him..."*

Paul is connecting joy to trust, which is assurance in God.

Let me see if I can wrap this up for us this weekend. This past week I had the privilege of meeting the phenomenal, I mean, amazingly talented, Michael B. Jordan. And I just happen to be going through Union Station and he was filming there a project for an upcoming movie. And so I had a chance to connect with him and speak with him briefly and I got a picture with him. And so I shared this picture with one of our staff members who is a huge fan of his. And she was going absolutely crazy and we were texting back and forth. And one of the questions she asked me, she said, "How did you get access to him? How are you able to just walk up to him and talk to him and, and get a picture with him?" I said, "Well, my sister is a a makeup artist and she is the department head for makeup on one of Michael B, Jordan's productions. And so she reached out to one of his guys that was with him and said, 'Hey, my brother is there, I'd love for you to meet him.' And so we spoke and he took me over to him and I was able to meet him. And we spoke about the work that my sister was doing and we both went on about our day."

And I started thinking about this and my colleague earlier, who I mentioned who you know, is a huge fan, she's the one who told me that he was at Union Station and she saw him as well and they were filming. You could get really close. And so we both had the same proximity to the same person, but it was a relationship that actually got me access. And see that's the thing with joy. See, we all have proximity to it or we're trying to create proximity to it with good things that are going or we try to create good experiences but it's a relationship with Jesus that is what's going to get us access to joy. And these things that we pursue that we hope to make our lives better, these experiences that we pursue that we hope to elevate our spirit it's not that those things are bad, but they don't produce sustainable joy.

Galatians 5:22 says that joy is the fruit of the spirit. So the last time I checked, if you're going to get fruit, you gotta be planted. And so it's this relationship this planting ourselves in a relationship with Jesus and his Spirit is what produces joy in us. And it's that relationship that keeps hope or the hope of anticipation alive when others may give up. It is that relationship that gives us assurance and security when storms and drama and disappointment, significant losses just rock our world. It's not that we don't have feelings as a result of those things that we don't feel those emotions, but joy is really like that sure foundation or that rudder that doesn't let us get too high and doesn't let us get too low.

It is the good news that we have received. It's not jolly, a good time or good things. I mean like that's cool, we all want that, but those things pass away. But it is the anticipation of what is to come and it is the assurance in our relationship with God that gives us joy, which then also produces peace in us.

I was just thinking about this right before this message. There is a song that I used to hear when I was growing up in church and it was a song about joy. I'm going to sing a little bit for you as we close.

{Singing}

This Joy that I have the world didn't give to me

Oh... This Joy that I have the world didn't give to me

The world didn't give it the world can't take it away

{End singing}

I want us to get to that point in our lives where the stuff that happens around us is not that it doesn't affect us. It's not that we don't have emotions about it. But this joy that we have, it wasn't given to us through our circumstances. It wasn't given to us through people, places or things. It was a relationship with Jesus that is keeping us steady. So now when we sing songs like 'Joy to the World, the Lord has come.' We understand what that means because we have a relationship that we've established with the One who has come.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for who you are. We thank you in the gift that you've given to us in Jesus. God, help us to unwrap the gift of joy in the form of our continued relationship with you. If there's anyone among us who has not established a relationship with you, or maybe they've broken off a relationship with you or they've been estranged from you, God, we pray for the establishment of a relationship this weekend or a reconciliation of that relationship. God, we thank you that this reminder that we have of this good news for all people, this joy that is for all people, and it doesn't matter what our socioeconomic status is. It doesn't matter what we've accomplished or how, how far we've, how much we failed, or how we failed in our lives. That joy, this joy unspeakable, we all have access to through your Son Jesus/ And we thank you for that access through the ultimate gift. It's in your Son's name that we pray. Amen.