

An Abundance of Joy

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Jeremiah 31:7-14 NIV

This is what the Lord says:
“Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
‘O Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.’
See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.
They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel’s father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.
“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:
‘He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’
For the Lord will ransom Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.
They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord —
the grain, the new wine and the oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.
They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.
Then maidens will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.
I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.
I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,”
declares the Lord.

Ephesians 1:3-10 NIV

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

From the thirty-first chapter of the prophecy of Jeremiah:

*This is what the Lord says:
“Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
‘O Lord, save your people . . .’*

*They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord
Then maidens will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.
I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.”*

This passage is the Old Testament reading assigned for the second Sunday of Christmas, and through it runs one prominent theme: *rejoicing, joy, gladness* because of what the Lord will do for his people.

For Jeremiah and his listeners, this joy had to be the anticipation of future events. Things weren't going well for the kingdom of Judah in Jeremiah's time. The powerful Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, were about to overrun the land and carry its leaders into captivity. Within a few short years Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon would be burnt to the ground, and then Jeremiah himself would be taken to Egypt, to die in exile.

But the prophet always looks ahead to the fulfillment of God's long-range purposes. The Lord's people had sinned against him, but he wasn't through with them yet. The days would come when the Lord would make *a new covenant* with them, and renew his promise: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). Furthermore, the Lord would give Jeremiah this word: "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jeremiah 33:15). God would act to restore to his faithful ones that which the sin of their leaders had taken from them: that loving relationship of sonship, that special role of servanthood to which they had been called in their forefather Abraham, to whom God had said, "By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." (Genesis 12:3).

Yes, the prophets of Israel, like Jeremiah, look forward to the fulfillment of God's long-range plan. As the prophet Amos said, "Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). The prophets see through the sad and unpromising events of their own time to the greater promise of God's salvation. And that anticipated fulfillment is cause for rejoicing. But the prophets don't always see the details of God's plan. When the Lord told him, "I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow," could Jeremiah have known that the birth of a baby in the manger of Bethlehem, six centuries later, would be the way God would begin to bring his plan to completion?

In the hindsight of history we understand why it was appropriate for Jeremiah to proclaim gladness and rejoicing, *an abundance of joy*. For that's our response to the Gospel message: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). Hearing once again the story of Christmas, we can act on Jeremiah's words: "Sing with joy for Jacob . . . Make your praises heard . . . dance and be glad . . . I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow." Such abundance of joy is appropriate for us because of what God has done to redeem us in Christ. And so we sing,

*Good Christian men, rejoice
With heart and soul and voice.
Give ye heed to what we say:
News! News! Jesus Christ is born today.
Now ye hear of endless bliss.
Joy! Joy! Jesus Christ was born for this.
Now ye need not fear the grave:
Peace! Peace! Jesus Christ was born to save.*

And guess what? We're not the only ones rejoicing over the birth of a Savior. The joyful cries don't just echo across the face of a sin-sick and weary earth! For Scripture tells us that the hosts of heaven join in singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will." And — this will blow you away — God is rejoicing too! "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; *he will rejoice over you* with gladness, he will renew you in his love; *he will exult over you* with loud singing as on a day of festival." (Zephaniah 3:17-18).

Have you ever thought that when we sing and rejoice over what the Lord has done for us, *God sings too*? Listen to what Paul says about God in our Scripture reading from the Letter to the Ephesians: “In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he *lavished upon us* with all wisdom and understanding” (Ephesians 1:7-8). God has *lavished his grace* upon us in the coming of his Son. He doesn’t spare his love to us, but pours it out in abundance, and along with it an abundance of joy as he rejoices and sings over us!

“Joy! Joy! Jesus Christ was born for this!” There’s a joy, an abandon, in God’s presence that we feel especially at Christmas time. We express it in many ways — through these wonderful decorations, the flowers, the candles, the carols, the times of fellowship and festivity, the giving of gifts, the special food and drink. It’s all wonderful, a response to the gift of new life in Christ, the grace God has lavished upon us!

But one thing concerns me, and that is this: Will we retain the joy of this festive time through the days, weeks and months of this coming year? The apostle Paul said, “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and *joy in the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 14:17). Will we live in that same joy once Christmas is over? As Lynn was saying last week, “It’s over, but it’s not over.” We were created to reflect God’s glory. Will we carry the radiance of Christmas into the new year?

The Christian life is intended to be a life of joy in the Holy Spirit, the life of Jesus in our midst. Paul expressed this way: “Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart” (Ephesians 5:18-19). When we experience the touch of the Lord, that’s supposed to show in the way we express ourselves. *Sourpuss Christians negate the Gospel*. If the Holy Spirit truly has a hold on us, people will know it by the smile on our face, the spring in our step, the words of thanksgiving and praise on our lips. If we truly believe that the coming of Jesus has made a difference in our destiny, people will see it in the abundance of joy with which our lives overflow.

We live in a culture where it’s hard to be joyful, especially for men. Men are supposed to be macho, cool, unexpressive types like the cowboy heroes of the screen. It’s okay for men to be *angry*, but when a man behaves *joyfully* we think he’s a weirdo. It might be easier for women to have a joyful demeanor and not be thought to be playing with less than a full deck. So I guess there’s a reason the carols say, “Good Christian *men*, rejoice!” or “God rest ye merry, *gentlemen*.” The compulsive, task-oriented male personality may need special encouragement in this regard.

But, quite frankly, I’ve known plenty of joyless women in the ranks of the church. We all may need some help and encouragement in living with an abundance of joy. If we’re going to know that life of gladness and rejoicing to which the Scriptures call us, then we may have to start *practicing* joyful behavior. We may think we’re phonies if we act joyfully when we don’t feel it, but *joy can be learned* just like any other type of behavior. In fact, being joyful is a command from the Lord, even if things are going badly: “Rejoice and be glad,” Jesus says, “for your reward is great in heaven” (Matthew 5:12). A God-given principle of human behavior is at work here: our inward emotions are influenced by our outward actions. If we *act joyfully*, eventually we’ll come to *feel joyful*.

I believe a good place to begin practicing the life of joy is in our Sunday worship services. I wouldn’t want to try to worship as a poker-faced Christian — someone who loves the Lord, but goes through the worship time like a churchified zombie. Somewhere, Christians got the idea that worship is supposed to be a somber, colorless, unexpressive sort of activity, something so inward that it has little outward manifestation. But biblical worship is anything but that! Think of David, dancing before the Lord, singing the “new song.” Think of the Psalmist’s exhortation to “Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord!” (Psalm 134:2). Think of the Israelites with their colorful festivals and processions. Think of the New Testament church, where the unbeliever comes into the assembly, hears the word of prophecy, and falls on his face saying, “God is really among you” (1 Corinthians 14:24--25). Think of Paul, who says, “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands” (1 Timothy 2:8). Think of Jesus, who “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21) when the disciples returned to him to report the effects of their preaching. The Greek word Luke uses to describe Jesus’ action, *angalliazo*, actually means “to dance around.” Biblical worship is a worship of *abandon*, filled with joy that manifests itself in activity you can see. When Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor brought the people of Judah together to renew their covenant with the Lord, they told them, “This day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

Many evangelicals regard Holy Communion as a solemn time when we focus on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It *is* a solemn time, but solemnity isn't the same as sadness. Holy Communion is a joyful time, because we share the emblems of Jesus' life among us: the bread and the cup, the symbols of his body and blood. Paul calls this holy meal the Lord's Supper, but his words in Greek — *kuriakon deipnon* — could be translated "imperial banquet."

Paul said a very interesting thing when instructing the Corinthians about the Lord's Supper. He said, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Holy Communion is a time of joy and celebration because it anticipates *the coming of the Lord* into our midst. In fact, in the Greek we could even take Paul's words in another sense: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *so that he may come.*" I believe the risen Christ is present with us when we gather at his table, as we will do next Sunday. In fact Jesus told us, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). That's cause for an abundance of joy.

I realize that when my time is over as your interim minister, I'll probably be remembered most for the voices I use when reading the children's story. But I would *like* to be remembered as one who led you toward a new dimension of worship, a new abundance of joy in the presence of the Lord.

As evangelicals, we believe in doing things according to biblical models and principles. Stodgy, restrained, colorless worship *isn't biblical worship*. I've said before that we can't come into the presence of the Lord and then sit on our hands. I would like to see a breakthrough in worship: a congregation that sings with gusto and abandon, worshipers who lift the hand once in a while, perhaps an "Amen!" here and there (Amen?). I wouldn't mind if dancing broke out at appropriate times! I would like to see a church where the worshipers exclaimed, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" — and then showed that same gladness when they got there! Believe me, worship like that will transform your life; it has transformed mine. Because when we meet the Lord and allow his Spirit to move upon us, we learn to cultivate that "attitude of gratitude" that makes such a big difference in our personal happiness, our relationships, and our effectiveness as servants of the Lord.

"I will turn their mourning into gladness," says the Lord; "I will give them *comfort and joy* instead of sorrow." An abundance of joy is here for you and for me, for God has lavished it upon us in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay.
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.*

*God rest ye merry, ladies, too —
Our sisters in the Lord.
Rejoice that God has come to us
In his incarnate Word,
And lavished on us all his love,
His Spirit fresh outpoured!*

*Oh, tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy!
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy!*

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