

Coming Home: Joy is Our True Home

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 12/15/19
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Many of you are familiar with what we call “The Christmas Story.” About Mary’s surprise announcement to Joseph; about a census; a town with no rooms available; about using a feeding trough for a bassinet; the shepherds; the star; the magi coming from the East.

And the assumption of many people is that the people at the time of Jesus’ birth were looking for the sentiments of hope, peace, joy, and love. But that’s not really true.

They were looking to be rescued, to be saved. They were looking for someone. They were looking for someone to bring them out of the circumstances of their lives.

They were looking for a warrior-king because they were stuck in poverty; they were oppressed by those in power; they had no room to make their own decisions. With no hope of any change to come. The Jews of Jesus’ age and the Jews of today believe that the purpose of Messiah was to usher in a new age of goodness.

Now you would think that with Jesus being the Messiah that life would get better, but in fact, life got harder. And if life was actually harder, then how could Jesus possibly be the Messiah?

So those early Christians were persecuted not only by religious leaders but also because they weren’t willing to placate the pagan gods to which they were supposed to offer their worship.

I’m not seeing any joy in this yet. But all persecution aside, I remember when I was very young, my early memories of Christmas involve my maternal grandparents. It was an adventure going on the “Knowlton Bridge,” (A one-lane bridge with a train-trestle alongside the one lane).

The one thing that was usually asked of me was to draw a Christmas picture for grandpa and grandma. I detested doing it. I think I usually put up a fight about doing it. But I did it. After all, presents were in the balance. I hated doing it because, I knew in my heart, I was not going to be an artist. Sometimes joy is hard to come by at Christmas time.

Today’s scripture has some interesting possibilities for us in this sometimes frustrating season.

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in every situation.” Words that are easily forgotten. Words that the apostle Paul wrote to the little church that he started in Thessalonica in a letter from that had to be written from the city of Corinth.

The Book of Acts tells us that Paul and Silas were forced to flee from Thessalonica when some of the religious leaders in Thessalonica hired some thugs to terror the early Christians and generally set the city in an uproar.

Those early Christians were discouraged. The Promises weren’t becoming reality. Some of the Thessalonians Christians were falling away.

Paul’s word to them was to “Hang in there.” “And while you’re hanging in there, this is what you can do so you can find joy in the midst --then Paul gives them this Trinitarian formula:

- 1] Rejoice and give thanks for what has already been done for you in Jesus;
- 2] Allow the Holy Spirit to work in you today to test what you’re hearing, hold on to the good and reject the rest;
- 3] And continue to look to the future with faith in God as God makes you faithful and blameless for the time when Jesus does return.

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These can become the skills that lead to joy.

We reconcile our past and Jesus came to forgive that we might be able to forgive others. We'll never find joy if we're still carrying a lot of baggage around from the past.

Of course, many times reconciliation cannot happen and sometimes it should not happen. After all, it takes two people to work on a relationship.

Giving that brokenness over to Jesus can help us to leave it behind.

So what does it mean that God provides the means to find freedom from the burdens you carry? Jesus is the means. Our relationship with Christ is what allows us to give over that burden.

We also stay fully engaged in the present, just as Paul said, "allow the Holy Spirit to work in you today."

Jesus' true victory was realized when he sent the Holy Spirit into the hearts of his followers at Pentecost. And we depend on that Holy Spirit to guide us – to lead us – to help us know what to keep and what to throw away. To know what is good and right and joyful, and what is destructive.

As long as that's true, there's hope.

And then we look to the future with faith; with the knowledge that God is continually working on us, and with us – and will take over faults and redeem them.

And as long as that's true, there's no way for us to fail. God's unconditional love brings us to our knees in humility and raises us to new heights of healing and wholeness. As long as that's true, there's hope.

And Yes, in spite of my protests in having to draw a picture Grandma and Grandpa Kratwell, there was joy in giving that picture to them.

Psychologists will tell you that there's a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness being that short-term feeling we get; the sensation that rises up in us as the result of some outside circumstances – something that happens outside of us.

But joy is a state of being. It is a way of living that, if we remember to give thanks and allow God's Spirit to guide us, and as we remember that God loves us and live into that unconditional love with great courage and faith, then we too can live with joy.

That doesn't mean that happiness gets shoved aside, because happiness is a part of the whole experience of joy. The Biblical concepts of joy and happiness are one in the same. Depending on the translation, the Beatitudes are translated "Blessed" or "Happy. E.g. "Blessed/happy are the peacemakers."

Advent is also about the coming of Christ – the first time – waiting for Messiah. And yet, we still have faith that as we find joy in the waiting, Christ will come again and will reconcile us to himself. Hope is coming home and it is time to make room for the joy.