

ADVENT 3 - PURE JOH
LUKE 2:1-14, JAMES 1:1-8
2024-12-15

Well our journey to Bethlehem continues. Our time of Advent is focusing on the coming Messiah, the Christ child, and also on His return in glory and victory at the end time, also known as the apocalypse. We have seen in Isaiah that **God doesn't want us to simply go through the motions** of humbling ourselves, but to **ensure that injustice and exploitation are not tolerated**. God says don't turn away from anyone in need: share your food with the hungry, provide shelter for the homeless, clothe the naked, and then when you cry for help, you will hear God answer, "Here I am." That message from Isaiah is part and parcel of the hope of the prophets that we speak of in the first week of Advent. **That kind of hope means there's Hope for Everyone in the arrival of the Christ child**. We are to **reach out to others** as individuals and as a church, not because we need them, but **because they need what—really who we have and know—Christ**.

You see, **the world is open to a gospel it can see as well as hear**—it's a gospel of **truth and proof**. We've reiterated that **Jesus didn't just** come and **tell** people the good news. It was always accompanied with healing and help in daily living. **God's message is compelling**. **We need to be equally compelling** as His messengers in **connecting people to the God of amazing grace!** And, of course **we grow best when we are serving and giving ourselves away to others**.

Then last week we focused on **peace**. Peace, it turns out has something to do with **light**. Again Isaiah told us that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of darkness (or death) a light has dawned. **That light, of course is Jesus Christ**, the light of the world! We light candles during Advent symbolizing His bringing light into the world. **Jesus casts out darkness**—even the darkness of our inner secrets and ways, when we have hurt people by what we've said or done, or conversely, when we've remained awkwardly silent instead of supporting our brother or sister in Christ. Remarkably, this usually happens with people we know best. Even more remarkably, Jesus tells us we are the light of the world. Through Him we are to bring His light to those who are yet strangers to His grace. In the big picture, **we encounter a world that speaks of peace, but doesn't have a clue about how to achieve it**.

And once again **Isaiah reminds us that God has shattered the yoke that burdens His people**, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors so that the chains of injustice are loosed. **As we love others**, including our fellowship right here, and treat them well, building them up, **God**, in whom there is no darkness, **will make "your light rise in the darkness"**.

The Prince of Peace will accomplish that in us. We discovered three important truths last week:

- 1) Jesus is peace.**
- 2) We are incapable of peace without Him.**
- 3) Peace is His gift to us and it's a peace that passes all understanding.**

Peace in the world is an **absence of war**. **In the church** it is the opposite of disorder; **it's harmony** among us. It's a **gift in the salvation** that Christ offers. It's the **goal and content** of all **Christian preaching**. Peace is **essential to God's love, grace and life**, different from the world's peace because it is given by Christ Himself. This is important: **peace is all-embracing or it's not at all**. You **forfeit peace when** you are at odds with your brother or sister, for peace is grounded in the righteousness & wholeness that God gives us for the sake of Christ. That's a high price to pay for stubbornness or pride! The **Church is built in the peace of Christ**, called to it. So God **compels us to be at peace with one another**; forgive others or He will not forgive you. To have the **best Christmas ever** you were to offer a Christmas pardon to someone you've had any negativity about. Otherwise you perpetuate a broken church. **How did that go?**

Today we take a look at **joy**. Surprisingly, I had a hard time with this one. I took another look at **C. S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy***. It's a pretty good read, but not something that's easy to condense into a sermon. Lewis, **like many people, searched relentlessly for joy everywhere**, convinced that it was attainable if he only found the right intellectual combination. He was a voracious reader, a professor of classical ancient literature and philosophy. But in spite of pouring over the works of the great philosophers he couldn't find the key that would provide him joy. In fact, quite the opposite occurred. A devout atheist, he became quite disillusioned. That is **until he recognized the missing essential. He came to understand the truth of God's Word, wherein he found the relentless mercy and love of God. He was ultimately surprised by joy.**

Some of you I imagine are familiar with **Corrie Ten Boom**. She was part of a Dutch family that hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. They were discovered and her family ended up in concentration camps, but she was with her sister. You've doubtless heard or seen the abominable conditions in those camps. Regardless, Corrie's sister, during a Bible study in the barracks prayed, thanking God for the fleas in the barracks. Corrie, thinking her sister had lost her mind, asked her what in the world she was thinking! Her sister softly replied, "Do you see any guards in here stopping us from having this time in God's Word, praying & fellowshiping together? No you don't. They won't come in here because of the fleas. So thank you God, for the fleas!" **Now that's touching on joy.**

James opens his letter with "**Consider it pure joy**, beloved, whenever you face trials of many kinds." He goes on to say that such testing develops perseverance, which in turn makes

us complete so that we won't be lacking in anything. But it's not hard to agree that **it's difficult to consider trials great joy. We're usually much more focused on**, "Lord, get me out of this mess. What have I done wrong to deserve this? But in truth, **the Lord builds our character through adversity**. The proof of that is pretty straightforward; **which have you learned more from**, your successes or your failures. Sometimes failure is so impacting on us that we do everything to ensure that we don't make the same mistake a 2nd time. Nevertheless, there is some **sense of joy in knowing** that you've faced a difficult situation head-on, & with the Lord's leading, with Him right at your side, you prevail to fight a new fight & face a new day. Before we look at a few of the specific joys immersed in Advent, **it's worth understanding just what joy is**. Paul the apostle helps us with this in **Philippians**. It's often referred to as **the Bible's joy letter**, so it's a good place to look. Chapter 3:1 says: "**Finally, beloved, rejoice in the Lord!**" In the end, we are to **live the indestructibility of Christian joy**. The Philippians might well have faced the same persecution that Paul underwent. But rather than seeing his or their plight grimly, **beyond it there is joy. Jesus said, (Jn. 16:22) "No one will take away your joy."** **That is true because Christian joy is in the Lord**. Our lives are lived forever in the presence of Jesus Christ. **So even where joy would seem to be an impossible thing, Christian joy remains because nothing can separate us from the love of Christ** (Romans 8:35-39).

So, **here is the great difference between joy and happiness**. The world is relentless in its pursuit of happiness. All the lottery ads that pair **things** with happiness, all the consumer driven commercials, particularly at this time of year that tell us how much better our lives will be if we only have...they all reveal the clear difference between happiness & joy. **Happiness is locked in to circumstances**; you can be happy if..., you can be happy when... **Joy, on the other hand** exists completely apart from circumstances. And that is because **Christian joy** is not dependent on any thing; **it is rooted in a person**, and that person is Jesus Christ. And since Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, not changing in any circumstances, therefore, our joy never changes when the circumstances change. In fact, Nehemiah (8:10) affirms that "The joy of the Lord is your strength." **In Christ there is joy, so like peace it is a gift from God**.

The Christmas story is full of joy. The angel **Gabriel spoke to Zechariah** in the temple, telling him of the birth of his son, John the Baptist, saying, "**He will be a joy** and a delight to you and **many will rejoice** because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." At the news that she would be the mother of the Messiah, **Mary declared, "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."** When the pregnant Mary visited her more pregnant cousin **Elizabeth**, (Zechariah's wife) Elizabeth, said, "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, **the baby in my womb leaped for joy**. Blessed is she who has believed what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." When John was born to Elizabeth, **her neighbours**, understanding the miracle the Lord had provided, (because of her advanced years and barrenness) **shared her joy**. And of course, at the heart of the Christmas story, the angel of the Lord, speaking to the terrified shepherds, says, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be

for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”

Beloved, there is **the heart of the matter. God has invaded our world** because of His unrelenting love for us. In spite of our sinful ways He would not be deterred. **This is the best news ever; the best news possible. This great joy is for all the people.** Now the question is, **are you living in that joy?** Or, have you let it pass you by, let it slip away? **This joy is a gift. It would be a shame to not unwrap it, a shame not to wrap yourself in it, a shame not to have the centre of your being wrapped in joy.** The only thing you need to do is receive your King, then join the multitudes of heaven and earth that sing.

The next question is, have you shared that joy with someone this Advent? Share with your family, your neighbour, your local merchant, your colleague, your friend, the rich reason for your rich joy. **Be a part of ushering in “Joy to the World.”**