

"Reaching with Joy"

OT: Psalm 126

NT: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

For ten years, the American Southwest experienced a devastating drought. Centuries-old pinyon trees that covered the hills throughout northern New Mexico became susceptible to bark beetles and died by the thousands. Once green landscapes turned grey with dead trees. For longtime residents, it felt like a death in the family. (*Wildfires in California*) Then one summer, it rained. Within days, fields of wildflowers sprang up. People could not believe their eyes. Every patch of ground was covered with yellow cow-pen daisies, purple asters, and other flowers not seen in a century. But the rain alone was not the reason for the riot of color. The needles of the dead pinyons provided mulch and nutrients needed by long-dormant seeds. The trees themselves would never be restored, but their death gave birth to new beauty as far as the eye could see.

Psalm 126 is a psalm of thanksgiving, celebrating God's past saving acts throughout history, and it teaches us at least three things: to look for signs of God's promise in dark and difficult times; that only those who move toward God with the 'tears' of repentance and need may enter into the joy of 'the great thing God does for us'; that God's power transforms sorrow into joy.

Theologians and writers refer to it as a hidden divine law and I just call it a hard pill to swallow: "sowing in tears and reaping in joy are inseparable." To the eye of faith temporal suffering is a necessary stage on the way to joy in God's glory.

Immediately, I think about Holy Week and Easter and Advent and Christmas. Easter and Christmas have the tendency and focus to exude joy and celebrate. But right before the joy is experienced, we encounter some of the most difficult reality; the events of Holy Week are not joyous- they are sacrificial and gut wrenching- and the events of Advent test our patience levels by telling us we must wait. The joy is coming, just not yet.

The other side of the coin, however, is that Easter and Christmas are not just viewed as joyous for everyone. Sometimes people experience these seasons with tears as a personal sadness, remembering a loved one who has died or a relationship that has ended. One commentator reflects "Sometimes our tears are a sorrow we share as a people of God and a nation as we recognize that our preparations for the coming light of Christ, the Prince of Peace, reveals just how far we stray from God's desired path." What happens is that these sorrows and tears can separate us from God, especially when we remain shallow in our understanding of true joy.

You see, we often stop and limit our understanding of joy in terms of happiness or prosperity. This understanding leaves us short and longing for more. That understanding of joy is empty in nature.

True joy, that is joy that God reaches out to us with, is not empty. The joy God reaches out to us with is fulfilling.

True joy is not simply experienced happiness described by financial well-being, promotion, or the ability to finely do something you deeply desire. Anyone can experience happiness. Some might even argue happiness is a choice you have control over. The Declaration of Independence even states anyone has the right to the “pursuit of happiness.” But joy is much more than a passing, elusive, or brief feeling of relief or confidence. True joy for the people of God is a top shelf, one of a kind, and yet available to all, unique joy.

William Barclay, a well-respected professor and theologian says, “It is not the joy that comes from earthly things, still less from triumphing over someone else in competition. It is a joy whose foundation is God.” This joy comes from a relationship with Jesus, the one who is able to give us an eternal perspective no matter what our circumstances.

“Joy is never in our power, and pleasure is. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted joy would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasure in the world.” In another reference C.S. Lewis says, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

As Christians, we are to believe that joy is a reality in our life no matter what happens to us. When the leaders of the early church were beaten in Acts 5:41, they rejoiced because “they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name of God.” That is a silver lining perspective! That is the gift, and the power, of God’s joy in our hearts.

“Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian” (G.K. Chesterton)

“Joy is that ever deepening awareness that our lives are hidden in Christ and that we can be led by the Holy Spirit through anything. Afflictions, trials, pressures, or frustrations may come, but they cannot destroy us; so, we experience joy. We may genuinely hurt; we may weep; we may be tempted; we may not understand what God is allowing to come our way; but none of this causes us to lose God’s focus in our difficulties or hampers our ministry to the needs of others.” (Jack Hayford)

True joy is different from happiness because joy has the ability of eternal fullness and not just temporary elation. True Joy is a gift that comes to us from God in the form of restoration, completeness and wholeness and this true joy from God transcends all earthly circumstances and gives birth to new beauty as far as our eyes can see.

Again, a hard pill to swallow yet a necessary one, Psalm 126 suggests we cannot experience this joy without first experiencing the tears and pain, caused by humanities' sins and shortcomings, and turning to God with a recognition of need to be restored and renewed in God's goodness and grace. It is in our tears that God reaches to us with joy.

Whereas that is reality and the root of the good news of God, I do not believe that is the only side of the joy coin. I do not think we only have to be found on our knees with our heads tucked down and tears pouring out from our souls for God to reach out to us with joy. True joy is experienced also in times of celebration (consider the marriage of a couple who is deeply in love, an Anniversary, or a birthday party for a 1 year old eating cake for the first time), times of achievement (consider a student who gets to throw their cap and tassel at graduation, or a play that gets performed with a standing ovation), relationships (consider the feeling of being with friends and the experiences you have together), and even unexpected moments (when a gift shows up at your front door you didn't order it, the phone rings and someone lets you know they are thinking of you, or your server after dinner comes to let you know someone else has already gotten your check). Sure, we feel happiness, but when we look closely and consider it all, there is something more than circumstantial happiness present.

In what ways can you recall God reaching out to you with joy?

Now comes the time we shift gears in the message. Just like last week, when we first talked about comfort being a gift God reaches out to us with and we are the recipients of God's comfort, but then we are to reach back to God by reaching out to others with comfort, such it is with God's joy.

I was gifted a handmade piece of art earlier this summer that now sits right beside my computer in my office. It is a picture of a tree with the fruits of the Spirit as leaves and Christ as the roots. As I looked at that picture this week, I was reminded of a wonderful thought: "Joy is not something we produce on our own. Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit package and will be a natural part of our lives when we are connected to the vine. Joy is a supernatural result of belonging to the one who is pure joy." (Trask and Goodall- The Fruit of the Spirit) You know what I hear in that belief. With God in us, we are superheroes with the superpower of joy. Brothers and sisters in Christ, I do not care who you are, "That's awesome!"

1 Thessalonians 5, which we read a few moments ago, is a part of Paul's earliest writings to the early church and in it he makes a firm charge to "Rejoice always." In talking about how we are to live the good life in light of the imminent expectation of Christ's coming and return, one of the things Paul says we are to do as we still live is to rejoice always; embody joy in God at all times and in all circumstances. How? How are we to do that? No surprise, Paul has an answer for us. Live in the faith and hope of God's joy, which is defined in the completeness and wholeness of your life given to you by God. It is wholeness that is at the foundation of Paul's understanding of the good life. For Paul, that wholeness is made up of being joyous, prayerful, Spirit-filled, prophetic, and tested. Paul declares that a good life, complete in the fullness of God, is one in which you "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." Our call to unceasing joy, prayer, and thanksgiving is to be an unrestrained action. It is not an ethic of moderation but of complete devotion.

So here it is! Because of the joy God reaches out to give us- the completeness, the wholeness- we are to reach back to God by reaching out to others by rejoicing always. Our charge is to be superheroes and impose our superpower of God's true joy on the world and not hold back.

We can reach with joy by standing on the promises of God received in scripture:

Several years ago, I was given this prescription bottle with the message: "Good morning! This is God. I will be handling all your problems today. I will not need your help. Have a nice day!" On the other side of the bottle, it reads: "God's Wisdom Vitamins. Instructions: Take one daily. Caution: Read the bible verse. Results: Joy!"

9 am- Each of you this morning was given a verse from this bottle and I pray you will be able to experience true joy in the assurance of God's presence with you.

We can reach with joy by leading others to know and experience the joy of Christ:

D.L. Moody reflects, "I believe that if an angel were to wing his way from earth up to Heaven, and were to say that there was one poor, ragged boy, without a father or mother, with no one to care for him and teach him the way of life; and if God were to ask who among them was willing to come down to this earth and live here for 50 years and lead that one to know the joy of the Lord, every angel in Heaven would volunteer to go. Even Gabriel, who stands in the presence of the Almighty, would say, "let me leave my high and lofty position, and let me have the luxury of leading one soul to Jesus Christ." There is no greater honor than to be the instrument of God's hands of leading one person into the glorious (joyous) light of Heaven."

We can reach with joy in our writings like Ralph Spaulding Cushman, a Methodist Bishop:

*Oh the sheer joy of it! Living with Thee, God of the universe, Lord of a tree,  
Maker of mountains, Lover of me!*

*Oh the sheer joy of it! Breathing Thy air, Morning is dawning, Gone every care,  
All the world's singing "God's everywhere!"*

*Oh the sheer joy of it! Walking with Thee, Out on the hilltop, Down by the sea,  
Life is so wonderful, Life is so free.*

*Oh the sheer joy of it! Working with God, Running His errands, Wanting His not,  
Building His heaven On common sod.*

*Oh the sheer joy of it! Ever to be Living in glory, Living with Thee,  
Lord of tomorrow, Lover of me!*

We can reach with joy in our singing, like Mary, the mother of Jesus:

In Luke 1:46-55, we are given a gift of joy from Mary. In this joyful hymn of praise known as the Magnificat, Mary recognizes God as the source of her unexpected honor. What God had done for her was sign of what God had done for others and will do for more in the coming days and years. We can even read it and sing it today with the opportunity to receive God's joy through Mary's shared joy.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, filled with the true joy of God that restores us, transforms us, and makes us whole, may we "rejoice always" in our reaching back to God and others.

Let all God's people say... Amen.