

That Your Joy May Be Full *
(from today's Epistle: 1 St. John i.1. ff.)

Happiness is a big American word. Pursuing ones dreams, making a fortune, realizing ones hopes. It is even enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as an unalienable right. It is fair to say that it is the goal of almost every human life. And part of happiness is pleasure: those things that make one feel good, that make life livable, that afford us something to look forward to. Many good and simple things bring us happiness and pleasure, whether family, or friends, or the beauty of this world in which we live. Sadly, they are very often also sought from sources that can never supply them, as we all know.

But what is joy? Think about it... do we hear it mentioned much at all independently of Christmas? Is it suggested as the consequence of buying a new car? Of a much planned-for two week vacation? Of a promotion at work? I can think of one telling exception: the birth of a baby! In any healthy and whole family, this rare thing called "joy" may indeed show itself at such an important moment.

But joy resounds throughout the pages of Scripture. It appears 63 times in the New Testament, and several of these are in connection with the Christmas account:

-When [the magi] saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy (Matt. 2:10).

-And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people (Luke 2:10)

I am fascinated with this thing called joy. I can say with certainty that I had never really encountered it until my conversion, when it was introduced as a brand new element into my life. Some of you are familiar with C. S. Lewis's book *Surprised By Joy*, the story of his own move from atheism to the Christian faith. Some quotes from the book are helpful:

"In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else... The quality... is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and Pleasure often is."

In an unpublished letter, he wrote playfully:

"Real joy seems to me almost as unlike security or prosperity as it is unlike agony. It jumps under one's ribs and tickles down one's back and makes one forget meals and keeps one (delightedly) sleepless o' nights. It shocks one awake when the other puts one to sleep. My private table [of equivalents] is [that] one second of joy is worth 12 hours of Pleasure."

Perhaps it's my scientific background that gives me a penchant for analysis, but I want today to look closely at this topic, as it affects you and me as believers.

* (This sermon was preached on January 3, 2016, as the Dec. 27th service was cancelled due to snow)

“Joy”, you remember, is listed among the nine “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22), and it is number two, after “love”. This means, simply, that if you possess the Spirit of God, you also possess joy. It’s that basic. There are important implications from this wonderful truth that we can find for our lives.

First, the presence of joy is unconnected with experience. It is supernaturally induced. In the midst of a dark Roman prison, the Apostle Paul could declare, *Rejoice in the Lord, and again, I say, rejoice!* (Philip. 4:4), as we read last week. The Apostle John, the focus of today’s feast, banished for his faith to the remote island of Patmos, wrote his epistle to the church so *that your joy may be made full* (1 John 1:4). It runs like an underground stream under all of the terrain of the Christian life, whether the valleys of hardship and sorrow, which are many, or the mountaintops of times of blessedness and peace. Joy for us, I think, should be stronger than life itself.

Now in saying this I do not mean at all that it needs to be visibly expressed. More often than not it is quiet, and undetected. It is a private, secret place of recourse for the Christian in the midst of his troubles. None other than our Lord Himself may know that the suffering believer is hanging on for dear life to this one possession which alone will sustain him. There may be no smile, no laughter, no obvious expression at all of exhilaration or happiness. How *could* there be, if one is going through a hard and sad time? To make an outward show of emotion would simply be an effort to drum up feelings one didn’t possess. But all the while, deep inside, the fountain of the heart is somehow being filled and refilled constantly by the supply which the Lord Himself has guaranteed as a consequence of His presence in our lives.

So, why *joy*? Why *does* the Spirit of God continually pour it forth into our lives? The source, I think, is the Gospel story, which is filled with triumph in the worst of circumstances. Have you observed the face of the winning runner who bursts across the finish line after the agony of the marathon? Do you remember the expressions of soldiers returning to the arms of loved ones after the long years of past wars? Or think of Jesus’ own tender words at the Last Supper as He reassured His disciples of His coming resurrection:

A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come : but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.
(John 16:21)

We have joy as an inheritance, because our Savior came to earth to become our sin-bearer. He conquered death, and hell, was resurrected, and has granted us eternal life. There is no message more joyous than this, nor any greater triumph. As it says in the Epistle to the Hebrews, *Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, ...for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God* (12:2). His joy has become ours. It is the joy of victory.

Look at the Christmas circumstances. It is their very lowliness and humility that make Gabriel's annunciation to Mary so wonderful, and the grand proclamation of the angels to the shepherds so ringingly bright. The joy of the moment is in absolutely stark contrast to the darkness of its background.

Perhaps it would be fair to conclude from this that joy, like water, seeks the lowest ground of our experience, where it thrives, and bubbles, and prepares itself to spring up into our lives when we are in greatest need. I'm sure many of you could give testimony to how God has sustained you with this gift at the most unlikely occasions in your life. But as with any fountain, it must be allowed to flow. It can be stopped. Though it is a strong current, when allowed to be, joy is a fragile thing that can easily be neutralized by our willfulness. Its chief enemy is sin. When we turn away from God, even in small ways, our loss of joy is one of the very first sure indicators that we have done so. Joy thrives freely in an atmosphere of obedience and dependency upon God. But it can never compete — perhaps it refuses to compete — where self-assurance, self-reliance, and self-will hold sway.

Mary's joy remained because she had refused to doubt God's Word. She was able to say, *My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour* (Luke 1:46-47).

We may have to look very hard for joy in our lives, at times. Perhaps these are the long seasons that prepare us for joy's experience. Joseph and Mary toiled along miles of country roads, with Mary in the very uncomfortable last stages of pregnancy, before they could see the fulfillment of the promise that had been made to her by the angel, and she held the Christ Child in her lap. The magi's trip was long and arduous, before the star they had followed finally settled on its destination. Our Lord Jesus Christ yet awaits the consummation of His own labors, that Day when His people will join Him in final triumph. And we ourselves wait along with Him.

But unending joy is growing ever nearer. In the meantime, we will satisfy ourselves with its steady supply, just when we need it.

It is yours to be had, believer. And it is mine.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.