

The Wonder of Christmas

Week 3: Joy

We are going to play a game called, **Helpful or Nonsense?** Here's how you play. You are given a topic related to the birth of Jesus, the coming of Emmanuel, God with us. From that topic you will be given quotes from famous people. After each quote, you will decide, "Helpful or nonsense." Each time you get it right, according to your host, Bill Greiner, you give yourself a point. If you can guess the person behind the quote, you get 5 points. At the end, the one with the most points gets a fabulous prize. **If you lose, you still win** because you get to give socks, underwear, gloves, and hats to the Sandford Clothes closet. **(Picture of the hamper in lobby.)**

"I sometimes wonder whether all pleasures are not substitutes for joy."

—C. S. Lewis

"The most profound joy has more of gravity than of gaiety in it."

—Michel de Montaigne

Michel Eyquem, Seigneur de Montaigne, commonly known as Michel de Montaigne, was one of the **most significant philosophers of the French Renaissance**. He is known for **popularizing the essay as a literary genre**. His work is noted for its merging of casual anecdotes and autobiography with intellectual insight.

Therefore, **we must blame him** for inventing the essay question part of the tests you took in school.

"Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls."

—Mother Teresa

Joy in looking and comprehending is nature's most beautiful gift."

—Albert Einstein

"Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing."

—William Shakespeare

"Joy is what happens to us when we allow ourselves to recognize how good things really are."

—Marianne Williamson

"Well, your greatest joy definitely comes from doing something for another, especially when it was done with no thought of something in return."

—John Wooden

"A sense of humor . . . is needed armor. Joy in one's heart and some laughter on one's lips is a sign that the person down deep has a pretty good grasp of life."

—Hugh Sidey

Hugh Swanson Sidey was an American journalist who worked for Life magazine starting in 1955, then moved on to Time magazine in 1957. He covered nine

Presidents, from Eisenhower to Clinton, and was author of the book Hugh Sidey's Portraits of the Presidents.

"He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy
as it flies Lives in eternity's sunrise."

—William Blake

William Blake was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. Largely unrecognized during his life, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual art of the Romantic Age.

"Joyful people are naïve, airheads who don't realize how much life stinks."

A guy I knew in college

Sometimes that's how people think. They think that **joyful people are shallow, unrealistic, hopelessly positive** in the face of mounting evidence of how bad things really are. **In short, they are phony. No one can be that happy.**

There is a lot of joy in the Christmas story. We can start with the angel choirs and the shepherds. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! Luke 2:9-11

Joy can start out as terrifying. Particularly when the God of the universe is involved. That's what I began saying when we were opening the first **Cultivate in the Mall**. I said it when we were trying something completely new in **combining two congregations into one**, when you aren't a mega church looking for where to put all the people. I said this phrase when we opened **Cultivate Sanford**. When asked, "So how are you doing?" I would always say "I'm $\frac{3}{4}$ excitement and $\frac{1}{4}$ abject terror."

Why is that, because this joy that comes from Jesus only comes when we are on an adventure with him into the unknown and uncharted, where there is no promise of smooth sailing. It's **giving up the idea of control** and stepping out in faith on a path that is blazed by Jesus and leads to Jesus.

Real joy is not about playing it safe. That's about being anxious.

When I read this verse, if you see the word joy you must shout "joy." ²² **But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Galatians 5:22-23**

It is the Holy Spirit within us, the presence of the risen Jesus that can produce joy in our life. It's what grows out of us, along with all these other Holy

Spirit produced attributes. **And what does fruit, produce from your life or my life, do?** It nourishes or blesses other people. But more about that later. **Joy is not self-generated that is happiness which is dependent upon circumstances and what I do.**

We come to this **same point in each of our advent sermons.** The wonders of Christmas are **hope, peace, and now joy.** None of these as produced by the Holy Spirit are **circumstance dependent.** That is the baseline for the rest of this sermon. **If it's not circumstance dependent, then that means joy is circumstance independent.** If things are good, joy can be there. If things are bad, joy can be there. **It's not as fickle as we think it is.** **And that means to rejoice or express joy is possible in any circumstance.** I can always answer the question, **God can you be so good, and rejoice with the answer.**

Let's look at a journey, a path taken that was hard, that was illuminated by Jesus and took people to Jesus. The result is rejoicing, even with some challenges along the way.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were **filled with joy!** ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and **worshiped him.** Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² When it was time to leave, they

returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. Matthew 2:1-12

Here's what we can know about this journey they took.

Assuming these magi were from Babylon, it would have been a trip of approximately 900 miles. It would have taken several months from the point of seeing the star, gathering the travel party. A trip like this would have cost a lot of money. Of course, they weren't at home either, away from friends or family. And there's the ever-constant danger of being robbed or even killed. These roads weren't constantly patrolled by law enforcement officers. This was the wild wild west where anything is possible. And then there are the accommodations along the way. No hotel, motels, or vrbo's as we know them now. And of course, no calling ahead. If a road is washed out then it will probably stay that way. It was probably more like a camping trip.

They had to be ready to adjust and adapt to the changing situation. We don't know in detail how many times plans changed on the way there, but we do know that plans changed for their trip back home.

They must have felt so strongly about what they saw in the stars and heard from the Old Testament prophets. This wasn't something you would do on a whim. And what was their reaction to the fulfillment of this trip? It was joy that led to worship.

When we think we've deserved something, or are entitled to something, or it comes easily, when we get it, the return of good feelings is less intense. It might be a moment of happiness, which is dependent on me getting what I have coming, but it won't be joy like what these men experienced. It was not diminished by the difficulty of their trip, it was increased.

Here's what we can learn from these joyful, tired, dirty Magi. The more difficult the journey, the greater the joy

We already know this. If something is too easy, the feeling of completing it is more like checking something off of your "to do list". But if it's hard, and there is sacrifice involved, then that's when we experience joy and we can rejoice or express that joy.

Had the messiah been born across town, instead of a three month trip on the back of a camel or donkey, would their joy have been so intense? If the promised king was born across town, there would be no hurry. They would not have needed to follow that particular star. The risk would have been low to none. They could pop in whenever they wanted.

⁵ For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true. And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you. ⁶ So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. ⁷ As a result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece—throughout both Macedonia and Achaia. 1 Thessalonians 1:5-7

Let's set this straight. They are saying that it is harder to be a Christ follower than to not. To not follow means you don't have to go against the flow of culture. There's less resistance. There would have been less resistance and easier if the magi would have stayed home in Babylon and watched the stars, read books, and advised the politicians on what they thought God or the gods were doing.

Can you imagine the magi explaining this to his wife? Let's call him Bob. "Honey, I was thinking about taking a work trip. There's a king being born, it's a really big prophecy, and the stars are saying the same...How long will I be gone? Oh, well, it's a bit of a trip, 4-5 months. "You're going to leave me with your kids for 4 or 5 months? Do you realize you'll be missing your daughter's ballet recital, and who will help your son with his Sanskrit homework? And my moms and dads' anniversary is in three weeks, you promised not to miss that... And how much is this trip with the boys going to cost? What? And you are going to give this king a gift. He ought to give you a gift...

But with more resistance comes real joy, the kind you express.

Once again, like hope and peace which are from Jesus, joy is not circumstance dependent.

If the path is difficult, that produces joy; then that demands that we must either...Push through or settle for less.

We have this misguided idea about joy, particularly about creating a good life for our kids. The culture is saying that if you smooth all of the bumps in front of your kids, if you clear out all of the resistance, they will achieve great things and have the good life, joyful life they deserve.

There's so much wrong with that last sentence. First, the path to real joy isn't devoid of resistance and struggle; it's the exact opposite. The difficult part makes it sweeter. The sweat makes us want to rejoice. Secondly, Joy as we said, is not circumstance dependent. This false theory says that if you remove the negative circumstances, then people will experience fulfillment and then joy. This isn't how the world works.

They used to talk about helicopter parents. Coaches and teachers used this to describe the parents that are always hovering to make sure everything is ok. They think they are helping, but what they are really doing is creating an unhealthy dependence, so that their kids never really grow up. The new description is lawn mower parents. These are the ones' who smooth the path in front of their kids so that they don't have to struggle to get to their goals. This is just another way of creating dependence and cheapening the accomplishments and stealing the joy.

There are two kinds of people; those who can handle resistance and push through and those who can't. Those who can't handle resistance will always be tempted to quit or take short cuts. In both cases, they miss the joy that comes from a difficult journey.

How many times would those magi have been tempted to quit or take a shortcut?

Let's say they got into a **skirmish with some bandits**. It's too dangerous, we should turn back. Or the **weather got bad**. "Let's just wait here until the weather clears, but the star is going to keep moving. We know it's Bethlehem, we will probably be able to find the newborn king. This trip is going to go over budget. Let's just wait here and send a couple of servants to find the king, return and tell us what they saw."

Our culture says that if it's too hard following Jesus and it isn't giving you the (ROI) immediate return of a happy, stress-free life, then why do it? That's the path that will certainly miss the joy that these men felt when they reached the place where Jesus was. The travelers were tired, dirty, and poorer for it, with a difficult return trip ahead of them.

Look at spiritual practices, like reading the bible, praying, regularly attending worship, fasting, tithing/generosity, serving others, all demand effort. They demand making time, pushing other easier things out of the way. There is resistance that leads to excuses. But when we make the effort, take the time, push through what it takes to get off the couch, put down the phone, turn off the TV, that is when we enter the presence of Jesus; That's when we create capacity in our lives for the transforming, presence of the Holy Spirit and that is the path to joy.

If you are expecting Christmas to give you joy, it won't.

Joy, like hope, demands that we keep the end in mind. ¹² I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached

perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ **I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.** Philippians 3:12-14

We are heading into a journey, starting in January, that could be life changing for some of us. But it will only be that for those who can press through resistance and not quit. We are going to read through the Bible in chronological order. It can be a year that changes people from church attenders to disciples of Jesus, who can hear his voice and obey. That can be you. You can get to this point next year and be a different person. One who didn't tap out, didn't take a short cut, and followed that path that took them to an intimate relationship with Jesus. That is where joy comes from.

Does the hard journey end in, "Is that it?" Was it worth it?

In the case of our magi, the answer is a definite, "Yes!" But their path was illuminated by God, and it led to an encounter with Jesus. That's why it created joy in them that they expressed in rejoicing.

Any path that doesn't lead to Jesus is a dead end. Some end quicker, others take a while, but they all end.

⁷ **These trials will show that your faith is genuine.** It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

⁸ **You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy.** ⁹ The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:7-9

That is a description of the person who can push through resistance. Their faith is proven to be genuine, they are purified, and they receive praise and glory and honor when Jesus returns. Because you have trusted him who you have not seen, you will experience inexpressible joy. That is joy that is so deep, so intense, that there aren't words or actions that can express that to the outside world. Think about that joy to come.

The process is as important as the goal. He's not just the goal, he's the path. "I am the way, the truth, and the life...

It's not about you and your achievement.

So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. ⁷ As a

result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece—throughout both Macedonia and Achaia. 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7

True discipleship always expresses itself in serving others. It is not achievement based. We get to be examples of how God can produce joy in us when we are about others, not ourselves.

This brings us back to the fruit of the spirit. When our lives produce joy in this anxious contentious culture that joy will nourish others. They can feed on it and want it for themselves. It can give them the strength they need.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Philippians 4:4-5 NIV

Some of my brothers and sisters are thinking being angry is somehow spiritual, always ready to pick a fight. I don't see that in the list of fruits of the spirit. When we produce this kind of joy, we make the Lord near to people around us. We make the kingdom, the reign of Jesus, present for others. They get to see a person just like them, just as broken and messed up as them, being made new.

Someone who has joy that isn't dependent upon the circumstances being good.

Rejoice when you realize that the journey was always leading you to Jesus. These magi could look back and know that their journey, that produced so much joy, was always, even when it didn't feel that way, was leading to King Jesus.

Steps of Obedience

1. Confess how you have settled for less than the joy of following Jesus.
2. Feel the emptiness of those attempts.

Don't dwell, but just acknowledge that those other attempts that didn't produce joy were, in the end, empty. Don't look back at it like an old yearbook that showed only the good parts of high school. There is power in labeling something, because then it is separate from who you are. It doesn't define you. You label that experience of chasing other paths to happiness and joy as empty, unfulfilling, painful, without progress.

1. Do one thing to trust Jesus by following Jesus.

You know what it is. Maybe it's to stop making excuses and commit to being in this fellowship regularly, even when it's difficult. I see some of our seniors, for whom it takes so much for them to get here, and the joy it brings. And some of us, it takes very little for us to say, not this week.

Or I'm too busy to be in a bridge group where I can experience real fellowship and the power of God working through the body of Christ. It's a source of joy.

⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! Luke 2:9-11