

Forty Days of Joy: Rejoice and Praise

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I Peter 1:3-9 Philippians 4:4

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ^{so} that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:3-9 (NRSV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philippians 4:4 (NRSV)

God, open us up to whatever you have for us in these words today. Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

This morning I had to decide what to wear to church. You all had to do the same thing. It's easier for me because I have this robe and it covers a multitude of sins. Right, choir? I thought you'd like that. In the summer when they used to not wear robes, they hated it because they had to figure out what to put on. The other thing is that I don't have to decide what kind of shirt to wear. When I was here as a youth pastor in 1983 one Sunday, I wore a lovely blue shirt to worship and with my robe I thought it looked fine. But apparently not, because in the staff meeting that week Dr. Walter Underwood, the senior pastor, presented me with a white shirt.

"Here at St. Luke's we wear white shirts in worship," he said.

Now I don't ask anything like that of our staff that way, but I will tell you I was so scarred that I will never wear anything but a white shirt to church ever again, no matter what. Even if I'm in a contemporary service I wear a white golf shirt. It's the best I can do.

So I had to decide what to wear, as did you. And I suggest that when you got dressed this morning you had to make another decision about what to wear. Isaiah 61 which is the passage Jesus is quoting in Luke 4 though he doesn't go quite as deep into the passage as this, says, "That the Messiah has come to provide for those who mourn in Zion to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit." To put on the garment of praise. To anoint yourself with the oil of gladness in the morning. Every day we have to decide if we'll put on joy.

The Scripture that we quoted today said, "Rejoice in the Lord most of the time, again, I say rejoice when you feel like it." That's not what the Scripture says! The Scripture says, "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say, rejoice! Always rejoice!"

Last week we talked about what is a resolution and that we should resolve to rejoice. To resolve something is to make a decision today that you will make a particular decision in a particular way every day. So we resolve to rejoice, we decide that we're going to rejoice every day. The Scripture is so clear. It is an imperative – a command. Rejoice!

Two hundred and eighty-one times in Scripture in Old Testament and New, it says to rejoice. Sixty-six times in the New Testament alone, the word *chairo* which is Greek for rejoice is used. It is such an important command for us. It's a decision we make.

Shannon Sedgwick Davis was on the staff for many years of the International Justice Mission, which has been the leader in the Christian response to human trafficking and human slavery around the world. They do amazing work. Then a number of years ago she left IJM to go work for an organization called the Bridgeway Foundation. It actually grows out of a capital group, it's their philanthropic arm. They have a very singular mission to alleviate atrocities in the world. They go about the world identifying where there are warlords or others committing genocide or atrocities and try and organize various groups to come up against them. But you'd have to meet Shannon Sedgwick Davis. She's this diminutive soccer-mom looking lady and you just couldn't believe she'd take this on. She has a book that came out in April called *To Stop a Warlord: My Story of Justice, Grace, and the Fight for Peace*. Her biggest campaign has been against Joseph Kony who's slaughtered thousands across Africa.

I was watching an interview of her and the interviewer asked, "How has this affected your faith?" She began to talk about how she came into this work. She said, "I grew up with rose-colored glasses. I was going to change the world. I came into this work with such optimism. The light in me dimmed with each failed attempt to stop evil. With each time rebels abducted kids. With the times young girls just rescued pulled free from a brothel wanted to return to that horrid place, the only place they knew. Increasingly I started to share with friends and fellow partners in this work that I was really struggling to find joy."

Then she tells this story of going to Darfur and interviewing these people that had just been through this incredible genocide and slaughter, where children had been forced to kill their own parents. It was just horrible. She said that you could feel the weight in that place.

She said, "As we're interviewing, someone starts to sing. And then everyone in the whole village starts to sing. Then they start dancing and singing and celebrating." She said, "And this white girl had to try to dance and sing!" Then she added, 'Here's what I learned. Joy has to be practiced." Joy is a discipline. Joy is something we decide to do. And even in the darkest places it's more important that we choose joy, that we make a decision to rejoice.

So what then is the ground of that joy? Where does that joy come from? How do we make that decision? If you remember last week we talked about "remember and rejoice," that we look back at what God has done in the world, in our church, in our own lives. We remember those things. Yes, the bad things begin to fade, the good things come to the surface and we see God's hand in all of that. So we remember and rejoice.

Today I want to talk about two other sorts of reasons or grounds for rejoicing and that is how we rejoice in tomorrow and how do we rejoice in today.

The Scripture we read from 1 Peter goes this way and I'll just read a piece of it. "In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you. Who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time and in this you rejoice."

We rejoice in God's tomorrow for us. And let me tell you about 1 Peter. It was written into an incredible persecution. Most scholars believe that Nero was in charge in Rome in 64 A.D. a fire went through Rome and Nero chose to blame the Christians for the fire. So he began a pogrom of persecution across the Roman Empire. Christians were being persecuted in ways they

had never been before. The Roman historian Tacitus who was a child during the time of this persecution writes this about Christians. He says, "In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport. They were covered with the hides of wild beasts and worried to death by dogs. Or nailed to crosses or set fire to. And when the day waned, they were burned to serve for the evening lights."

Now can't you see why in the midst of that kind of persecution Peter would write, "Man, it's hard! But just wait! This is what God's got in store for you. An inheritance undefiled, unfading, kept for you until that day, when this is over."

Now I suspect that none of you have had that kind of persecution. Not to that level. But I'm a pastor and here's what I know for sure, that everybody has their *stuff*. It may not be that bad, but we've all got our *stuff*. And being a Christian doesn't keep you from alcoholism or insulate you from depression. I know that in my own life. Or keep you from heartbreak that makes you wonder if you'll ever make it through the next day. Or from grief that overwhelms you. That stuff's real. And in those moments when it's hard to find something to rejoice in, we can rejoice in God's tomorrow for us, that it's going to be awesome. We can claim that joy even today. That's what Peter's telling them.

Now even if your life is going amazingly well, even if things are incredible, you know our lives are sometimes like riding a roller coaster, and even if you're on top of the roller coaster today you can still rejoice in tomorrow.

Here's what I want you to do. I want you to imagine the most amazing moment of life. It doesn't have to have actually happened. Maybe you're lying in the arms of someone you love very much and there's that incredible moment of intimacy and connection. Or maybe you're holding your newborn baby in your arms for the very first time. Maybe you're standing on a mountain with your best friends and you're together and you're looking at this amazing vista, and you think, "There's nothing more beautiful than this."

Here's what I'll tell you. As amazing as that is, what God has for us is more amazing still. It's more incredible even than that, and so that joy can be magnified by the joy that is to come.

I think I've told you before that *The Little Prince* is one of my favorite books. My father gave it to me when I was young, and he wrote an inscription in it. I still have the book, with the cover half torn off because my dog ate it.

It's a fable by a French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery and in the story the little prince tames a fox. He and the fox become great friends. They love each other. But the Little Prince travels about and he doesn't see the fox for a while. Here's what the fox explains to him: "If you come at 4 in the afternoon to visit, I'll begin to be happy by 3. And the closer it gets to 4 the happier I'll be." You see, we know what's ahead and what we experience now is a foretaste of that. The anticipation of tomorrow gives us joy for today.

Winnie the Pooh, to use another great theologian, is asked "What is your very favorite thing" And he thinks, and he says, "I think it's eating honey." Then he stops and says, "But there's a moment just before I eat honey that's really better still and I don't know what that's called." That moment just before. So the anticipation of what God has for us gives us great joy right now as we rejoice in tomorrow.

We can rejoice in yesterday, what God has done. We can rejoice in tomorrow, what we know God will do. But we can also rejoice in today.

Listen to the Scripture again. This is verse 8: "Although you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy."

I've been thinking a lot lately about the difference between what it was like when I was growing up as a young adult - that ended last year, I quit being a young adult last year. So when I was growing up as a young adult and watching my kids as young adults. When I was growing up, I would talk to my mom and dad maybe once a month. Maybe once a quarter, if I needed money kind of deal. I loved them, they loved me, we didn't chat much. Probably to their pain, but that's the way it was. I didn't live with them, didn't live in the same town.

My children talk to my wife on text message 111 times a day. One hundred and eleven times a day. I finally said, "I don't want on your text message stream anymore. Get a special one just for me because I'm special."

So as wonderful as that is - I think it's awesome and I don't mean to diminish it - but it makes me wonder if we lose the ability to be in relationship of love with people we don't see. I knew my parents loved me and I loved them. We could hold that relationship without any contact. The contacts that came were just so appreciated. If I wrote a letter or made a call, they'd think they'd won the lottery or something.

The Scripture says, "How do you stay in love with a God that you can't see. That when you talk you wonder if he's going to talk back but doesn't. How do you do that?" The truth is, the essence of our joy is that we know, we believe in, a God with whom we have a relationship with, whom we know with all our heart loves us so much. Loves us unwaveringly, unfailingly, unconditionally and we love in return. And that relationship of love... What does the Scripture say? "We rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy." That is the ground of our joy today. That no matter what circumstance happens in our life, that will never be taken away. That's the ground of our joy.

Now how do we build that relationship? There's a thousand ways. We study Scripture, we pray, we experience God. That's all of our work on our upward journey here at St. Luke's. We talk about the things that will help us grow up in a relationship with Christ.

One of those tools you see in the very first verse where it says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." That's praise. So one of the tools we have to hold fast to that relationship of love that gives us joy, is praise. To praise God, to praise God's goodness, to lift up just the character, the name of God as so good.

Now I'll have to say when I was a younger Christian this bothered me. So over and over in Scripture there is a command for us to praise God. It's tied together with rejoicing all the time. Here's the Psalmist: "Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name. Make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him, tell of all of his wonderful acts. Glory in his name. Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice."

Why would God command us to praise him? As a young Christian I thought, "Do I want to worship an egotistical narcissistic God who says, 'You gotta praise me! I need you to build me up! I'm not sure I'm that great so you have to keep telling me how great I am!'"

I thought, "I don't want to worship a God like that!" Then I got it. God doesn't want us to praise him for his sake, he wants us to praise him for our sake. Because in that praise we build this relationship we have with him that gives us great joy. There are a hundred reasons for praising so that the world would know. But I think the core reason is so that we would have that relationship.

We got a new dog at Christmas. His name is Vinny. Now you all have heard about Bruno. Once your children have grown you have to use dogs as your illustrations. Bruno was a great dog. He was obsessed with a rat that we haven't seen for a year now. He runs around in circles all the time. He's a great dog. He's a Chihuahua Dachshund mix.

Dee wanted an extra dog, another dog, and she wanted a big dog for Christmas, and we went to the humane society to get a big dog. But at the Humane Society you have to pass the little dogs before you get to the big dogs, so we see the little dogs first. And there's this little dog, a little dog that looks so sad. So we took this little dog. He's basically the same size as Bruno. So we think he's either a Chihuahua-whippet mix or maybe a Chihuahua-kangaroo mix. We're not sure because he can jump, and his ears are as big as his body. You go online and look at a joey - a baby kangaroo - that's our dog.

We go to the Humane Society to pick him up. You have to fill out an application to adopt a dog. One question on there asks "How will you train a dog? If the dog tears things up, how will you train the dog?" I always wonder if I answered that question saying "I'll just beat him senseless and leave him outside" if they'd give me the dog or not. But I've answered the right way. What I said is, "We'll praise the dog. We'll praise the dog."

Now why do you praise a dog all the time? Is it because the dog needs to be built up with praise? No, you praise the dog because it builds a bond between you. You say, "Good dog! Good boy!" Why we talk to our dogs that way, I don't know. And you give them a treat and then you praise them in every way. And in that experience, you're building up this bond of praise.

Friends, it is not rocket science. You want to have a better relationship with your spouse? Try some praise. Tell them they're awesome. Tell her she's amazing. You want a better relationship with your co-workers or in the next office? Tell them they're great. Find the things they're doing well. Give them praise for that. You know, it sounds like flattery, but I'll tell you it's real. Because what it does is build relationship. We offer praise to God as a way of building that relationship with one another.

Let me close with this today. This week I have been to the hospital to see a member of our church who's now in hospice care, though he wasn't when we started this week. It's John Duncan and he's 92. His name is on the list of charter members out there in the foyer if you want to look. I go to see him in ICU, and he's having trouble breathing. He has fibrosis in his lungs, and pneumonia, and a cannula and a mask on. His wife Brenda is standing at the foot of the bed.

The first time I'm visiting him in the hospital I walk in and say, "What's going on?" Brenda said, "Well, to make a long story short..." Then she tells this long long story about everything that's gone on in his physical life. So when she's done John kind of reaches up weakly and pulls off his mask. He says, "Well, I'd hate to hear a long story." Then he replaced his mask.

I'm laughing and Brenda's laughing and he's trying to laugh but he can't really since he's short on oxygen. He hasn't slept for days and his eyes are just droopy. Yet in those same eyes there's a twinkle. A twinkle of joy. Because John understands that there is a joy at the core of who he is that he can choose to put on. And we can do the same thing.

Gracious God, we give you thanks for your love for us most of all because that's the very ground of our joy. To know that no matter what happens you'll never leave or abandon us. That we have this relationship of love with you that is honest and authentic and real. And that we're not alone, that we're with you, and we can look back at our past and see how you're been at work. We can look forward to our future knowing what you have for us. And we can claim that relationship and that that would give us an indescribable and glorious joy. So we praise you God. Show us how each and every day to put on the garment of joy. Amen.