

“Finding Joy”
Sermon for Sunday, June 17, 2018

This morning we will join in a responsive reading of Psalm 98. It is a psalm of praise to God—a psalm of joy. This hymn inspired British hymnist, Isaac Watts” to write the words to the hymn “Joy to the World”. It is today the most-published Christmas hymn in North America. I invite you to listen for the words that inspired Watts as we read the hymn and sing our responses together.

Responsive reading of Psalm 98 [Geoff play through sung responses]

This is a hymn of rejoicing... of joy!

Do you think there is a difference between “joy” and “happiness”? According to the organization Compassion International, “Joy... is a choice purposefully made. It is an attitude of the heart and spirit, present inside of us as an untapped reservoir of potential. It’s possible to feel joy in difficult times... Joy can share its space with other emotions—sadness, shame or anger. Happiness can’t. Happiness is not present in darkness and difficulty. Joy never leaves... [Joy] brings to life peace and contentment.”¹ What do you think? Is there a difference between “joy” and “happiness”.

I would propose that joy comes from the inside of us. It dwells in the soul and if we choose, has the ability to remain steadfast regardless of the tides of life. On the other hand, I propose that “happiness” is a fleeting emotion, whose tide rises and falls with the frailties of life... that happiness comes from outside of us. Joy from the inside... Happiness from the outside. [I might have to think about that.]

We have all known people that never seem happy. No matter how much they have or how many good things come their way, they never seem to be happy. And we have all known people that have faced tremendous loss or challenge in life and yet, they still exude joy. They seem to have an anchor of joy that keeps them centered,
appreciative
and joyful regardless.

¹ Compassion International article: “The Difference Between Joy and Happiness”

The words of the psalmist exude irrepressible joy!

It is hard to think that his life or her life has not known difficulty or hardship, loss or grief, pain or anxiety and yet the psalmist is able to say...

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth...

Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy!

Listen to that! Those are words of joy!

The psalmist says that all of creation should be joyful!

All of creation, not just human beings, but the sea, the water, the hills are to be joyful!

"Well, maybe", we say, "the psalmist didn't have it so rough after all! Maybe he didn't know the kind of trouble I've seen! Maybe she didn't experience the struggles I face today. Maybe joy is only for those who have faced no trial."

But the Apostle Paul says, "No." Paul had experienced hardship—imprisonment, beatings, being run out of town, squabbles with colleagues, moving his tent-making business from town to town, sometimes alone. Life was hard for Paul. Listen to what Paul says in his letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:11-13):

"...for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

"I have learned the secret..." says Paul.

I have learned the secret of contentment... I have learned the secret of joy... joy lies in our relationship with Jesus. Not from the circumstances around us.

I can have joy even when life is hard.

I can find joy even when I am facing loss or disappointment.

I can rejoice even when things didn't go the way I had hoped...

when people let me down. I can find joy... why?

Because my joy rests in Jesus Christ! My joy rests in my relationship with God.

And the psalmist says: "God has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel." (v. 3a) Well that is okay that God loves the people in Israel, but I live in the United States! What does this have to do with me?

We want to remember that the psalms are from the Old Testament, and when the psalmist speaks of "the house of Israel", he is talking about God's people.

That is you and me! "God has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to you and me... to us as God's people... you are chosen by God and God loves you.

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On this Father's Day, it might be a good time to remember that Jesus told a wonderful little story about a Father

to teach his disciples and us about the character of God. And so he tells about this rascal of a younger son, immature, selfish, greedy, unthinking (know anyone like that?). And this younger son demands his share of the inheritance and heads off to the big city where he squanders everything...

no money left...

no friends...

and finally no food. He has hit the rocks.

It took him reaching a time of despair to remember where his joy lay... back home. But would his Father take him back even if it was only like a servant?

Hunger gets the best of pride and despair turns to a bit of hope and he turns his face toward home.

And Jesus says that as soon as the derelict son, turned... while he was still far off... not back home yet... not even close! When the son simply turned his face—listen to this--out of joy, the Father lifted his skirts and ran to him.

God rejoiced!

And in that moment the son was embraced by God's joy.

Life will ebb and flow.

Happiness will come and go.

But joy... well that is a different thing.

Our joy is in God, the Father who loves us.

And when we turn to him, God rejoices as well!

Let us pray.