



**Date:** December 16-17, 2017  
**Speaker:** Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor  
**Scripture:** Leaning Into Christmas-Joy vs Sorrow

Welcome to the third weekend of Advent at North Park. If you have been with us over the last few weeks, you know that we are in a Christmas series that we have entitled, Leaning Into Christmas. We have intentionally bolded the Leaning into Christ part because that is where we want to put the focus. Jesus. What do we learn from Him in scripture that we can apply to our lives specifically around the four themes of Advent?

Christmas is the season of Advent which comes from the Latin word, Adventus which means coming. During this time in the Christian calendar, we as Christians remember the coming of Jesus into the world and we anticipate a time when he will come again and consummate his eternal Kingdom.

The four themes of Advent are Love, Joy, Peace and Hope. The question we are asking throughout this series is, what did Jesus's life and ministry teach us about these four themes and how do we, as followers of Jesus, incarnate these qualities when the world so often wants to flip them around. Instead of Love, the world can be a very apathetic place, we can be apathetic people, can't we? Instead of Hope, the world can become a place of despair. Instead of peace, the world is more about discord and conflict. Instead of Joy, the world throws at us, sorrow.

Two weeks ago, we looked at Love and lit the love candle in the Advent wreath. Last week it was Peace and today, we come to Joy.

I don't know why, maybe it is all the snow we got or the conversations I have had this week, but I have been thinking a lot about being lost these days. About Exile. Exile is about losing our way, and have you noticed that it is not just about the physical. Being in Exile is not just about being physically distant or isolated from the familiar, like being

stranded on a desert island or in a big city. Exile can also be a state of mind or even, a state of the soul. As we have seen throughout our fall teaching series, *The Story*. The bible is a story about Exile. All throughout the pages of this incredible book we see God's creation, humanity in this back and forth condition of being in Exile. Physically, emotionally and spiritually distant or separated from their creator and God's constant provision to bring humanity, home. Bring us back to Him.

In fact, the story of Christmas, the story of Christ coming to earth is the way that God has brought us out of exile and redeemed us. Brought us home and back in relationship with him. But as we have been discussing over the past few weeks, the biblical Christmas story doesn't begin in Bethlehem, on a star filled night 2000 years ago. The origins of the Christmas story actually begin in what we know as the Old Testament.

God's provision and salvation for humanity actually begins all the way back in the pages of the first and second book of the bible. Genesis and Exodus and then unfolds over the next several hundred years. It is a journey recorded on the pages of the rest of the Old Testament. It is a fascinating story. You've read it? And as we have talked about before. It is a story where places become important. Are places important to you? Locations where something significant happened?

For me, Guelph is significant place for me, it is where I was born. Kitchener was where I was raised. London was where I went to school. Waterloo is where I raised my family. But, there are other places too. Parts of the U.S., the Philippines, Ecuador, Africa are all places God has used to profoundly impact my journey of faith. What are the places that have special meaning for you?

Just like there are personal places of significance to our lives, there are also biblical places that we need to take note of because they are where God was specifically at work.

The Garden of Eden is an important landmark that impacts our relationship with God. It was a place where sin was introduced to the world. We need to take note of it. Egypt, is another important landmark in our relationship with God. God saved his people from slavery in Egypt. He heard their cries and provided Moses, who led them out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. Sinai, is another important landmark in our relationship with God. Sinai is where God speaks to his people again. He breaks the silence. God hadn't spoken to a group of people for hundreds of years. But it is here, that God tells Moses to remind the people of all that he has done for them and then makes a covenant with them. It is at Sinai, that God gives his people the Ten Commandments.

Our culture has come to see these Commands as a list of stringent and legalistic rules but in their original context, the Ten Commandments were the means by which a relational God pulls his people out of their slavery and instructs them on how to live again. And this new life starts with, anyone know the first commandment?

*Exodus 20:2-3*

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.  
3 "You shall have no other gods before me.*

Life, abundant life starts with Remembering God, have no other gods before me. Remember the God who brought you out of slavery. Remember your story because when you forget your story, when you forget God, you risk becoming lost and enslaved all over again. And Babylon is an important landmark in the bible. It is an important place in the history of God's people and their relationship with Him. Babylon in the bible was a place of exile for God's people, it was a place where they forgot their story. A place where they ended up because they forgot God. They put other gods before THE God, Yahweh. And the result? They are lost. Again. Left crying out. Again.

And it is during this captivity, this exile, that we have one of the most familiar poems of anguish and

sorrow in all the bible. God's people are distant from Him, and all that is familiar. They are in the foreign land of Babylon. Listen to the pain and despair, the sense of being lost and the hopelessness.

*Psalm 137: 1-9*

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.<sup>2</sup> There on the poplar we hung our harps<sup>3</sup> for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"<sup>4</sup> How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.<sup>6</sup> May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.<sup>7</sup> Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"<sup>8</sup> Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.<sup>9</sup> Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

Does anyone journal? Keep a paper and pen close by and write out your thoughts? I journal every day. It is a great routine I have established as a regular pattern in my life. Nothing fancy. Basically for me, I read scripture and then jot down a verse or two that stands out to me. Then I write out a paragraph or two of what that passage says to my life. The Application. My journal is often used to express my praise and joy and thanks to God, but it is also used to express or confess anger, disappointment or frustration. It can be raw and unrefined communication between God and I. That is what is happening here in this Psalm. It is poetry, a journal entry between someone who has a history with God just spilling it all out. Crying out to God, in their exile. They are lost. Can you relate to the Psalmist's cries today? Let's take a few moments to look at it a little closer. I have to admit every time I begin to read this Psalm, I want to break out singing,

By the Rivers of Babylon. There we sat down. Yeah we wept, when we remembered Zion. Anyone remember that song?

Released in 1978 by the German disco band, Boney M. They also had the hit, Rasputin. Rah Rah Rasputin. But I digress. The younger generation can google to see what real music was all about.

*Psalm 137:1*

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

Babylon, today would be Iraq. The rivers were probably either the Tigris or Euphrates Rivers or their tributaries. The Israelite people, God's people in exile and slavery in Babylon, sat down and wept. Why? Do you know what happened to cause God's people to be in Babylon? They forgot their story. They forgot the ways of God. They forgot to put Him first. It is actually described well in,

*2 Chronicles 36:15-20*

*The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. 16 But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. 17 He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. 18 He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. 19 They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. 20 He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power.*

This is why they are weeping. They are in despair. And it is in the weeping that they began to remember their story again, they remember Zion. They were thinking about home. See Zion is Jerusalem. Remembering Jerusalem would conjure up all sorts of memories for these exiles.

Carolyn and I were in our hometown of Kitchener on Monday of this past week. We had some running around to do, and at one point we could have gone the quicker, main road but we decided to take a little detour and go past our old high school, Grand River Collegiate. Just for old time's sake. Carolyn and I went to High School together and those were good days. We have good memories and it was nice to bring them to mind for a brief time this week.

The Israelite exiles are remembering Jerusalem in this text. It was an important place. A landmark city for God's people. It is where the temple was located, the central place of worship. It is where the people would gather from all over the nation three or four times a year to attend festivals acknowledging and worshipping Yahweh, the God of the rescue, the God of salvation, the God of provision. And music was a huge part of their worship, just as it is for us today. Wonderful to have the choir. The Israelites would sing songs at these festivals, praising and remembering the acts of God throughout their history. They would sing songs as they travel to Jerusalem to these festivals and songs as they returned back home afterwards. By the Rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept, when we remember Zion. In the opening of this Psalm, they are remembering their homeland, their customs and all that goes with it. It's their story and a huge part of their story is their relationship with God. And the memories conjure up overwhelming despair and sorrow, homesickness.

Maybe you feel that way this Christmas. Maybe you are in an unfamiliar land today? Maybe it is geography. You are away from home. Whether that is Syria or Columbia or Europe or B.C. or even Newfoundland. Christmas time has a way of conjuring up feelings of nostalgia, homesickness. What are you lamenting today, being away from home? Is it the customs and traditions, the people, family, the geography? Maybe you can relate to this plea in this Psalm today.

*Psalm 137: 2-4*

*There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3  
for there our captors asked us for songs, our  
tormentors demanded songs of joy; they  
said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4  
How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?*

We get a sense in this stanza that God's people are being mocked, they are being made fun of by their captors. "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" Sing one of the songs of Joy you used to sing when you were back home!

Have you ever experienced this? Being asked to smile, put on a happy face when you were feeling anything but? Let me see you smile. Come on. Turn that frown upside down! And you just want to plow the person or is that just me? It is hard to put on a brave front, stiff upper lip, when you are feeling downcast, isn't it? I remember when my oldest son was just a toddler. We had him in a stroller in the mall. It had been a long day. He was cranky, we were cranky. Finally, we were making our way to the exit when this dear older woman, stopped us and put her face right up to the stroller. Oh, isn't he a cute little boy, you are a cute little boy, yes you are. What's your name? Yes, you are a cute little boy.

Now she was a sweet lady, but by this time, Scotty had just about enough. He was miserable and just wanted to be left in his misery. So, the next swoop in by the lady, Yes, you are a cute little boy, Scotty showed her just how cute he could be by spitting in her face. I didn't have time to ask her if she still thought he was cute as she hustled away.

But we all can feel like that, can't we? Just leave me alone, especially if we are being pestered and provoked. Let me just sit here and wallow a bit without having to fake a smile. How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? How can we worship, put on a joyful front, when we are in exile? When we are distanced from God and everything that we know to be familiar. How can we sing joyful songs, when we have forgotten our story? Did you notice a particular statement in,

*Psalm 137:2*

*There on the poplars we hung our harps*

This is the most disheartening, sorrow filled verse in the whole poem. Mark this passage as, rock bottom. All joy is lost when you hang up your harps. For God's people the Israelites, the harp was the central instrument in worship. It played a prominent role in the festival activities. Harps were played in the temple area when worshippers came to Jerusalem to honour God and give offerings. The harp was the instrument of joy and celebration. People played the

harp because they had reason to praise God. The harp was a sound you heard when life was good and joy filled. But the Israelites are not in Jerusalem any more, they're in Babylon and they have hung up their harps. There is no longer any reason to praise God. Dismal, all joy is gone. Can you relate to this?

Maybe you have been to Babylon? Not literally but metaphorically. Joy is gone. Despair has set in and you've hung up your harp. There appears to be no reason to praise God anymore, you are lost, in exile. Can I ask you something? What is your Babylon? Can you name it? Is it grief? Bitterness? Hopelessness? Despair? Maybe Babylon for you is a Disease. Or an Addiction. A Relationship strain. Or maybe it's a Sin.

I meet regularly with an older gentleman. He has been a Christian most of his life. Served in the church faithfully throughout most of his years. All of his now, adult children are faithfully following Jesus. He has generously supported his church and missions with his finances throughout most of his life. But he has had some experiences along the way that have resulted in him, now in his 80's, hanging up his harp. He has lost his Joy. Instead of turning into God with each disappointment or obstacle he encountered, he began to turn away. Maybe it all started when he was unceremoniously forced to take early retirement from a job that he loved and found a fulfillment in. A bit of bitterness set in, he turned away. He and his wife encountered some significant health challenges in more recent years. A bit more bitterness, he turned away more. He's had his license taken away and had to move out of his home and into a care facility, more bitterness. Further away. And now most days, he sits in front of the TV, with no joy, no passion, no direction. Lost. In exile. He is in his Babylon. He has forgotten his story. He has forgotten God. And his lack of joy rubs off on others. I think we all know people like this don't we?

The remainder of this poem in Psalm 137 describes what happens in our spirit when we lose our way and our joy gets zapped.

*Psalm 137:5-6*

*If I forget you, Jerusalem may my right hand forget its skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.*

The author is saying that if I forget Jerusalem, and all that that represents in my relationship with God. I am lost. I will no longer be able to play the harp or sing the songs of praise. The joy inside would be lost. And have you noticed, that when the joy is lost in us, the human condition is that we want to see is others lose their joy as well. Have you ever notice that? When you are feeling down or disheartened. There is this perverse pleasure in zapping others joy as well. Like Scotty to that old woman, we just want to blow raspberries in their faces.

If I can't find Joy, then I am going to do my best to ensure that no one else can either. If I am honest, I can have this effect in my household at times. When I am feeling joyless, I can zap other's joy as well. The older I get, the less I like winter, the cold, the snow, the driving conditions. Bah humbug. And when I know we are getting a dump of snow and I have to drive around, it stresses me out. Now, Carolyn of course, is the opposite.

This week, I was stewing about how the driveway was going to get cleared off because am still recovering from my little surgery and can't lift anything. (I think I am going to milk this one until about March). I was sitting in my office Wednesday morning after the big snowfall and Carolyn sent me this text, Driveway done (she had shoveled it). Looks good. I feel great. (Happy face Emoji) Love the snow and winter (heart emoji).

Do you know how I responded? Not with a heart of gratitude or joy that she had taken care of things. This is what I wrote. Did you shovel it? You have a bad back. All it would take is one little tinge and then you are laid up. Stubborn. No cute happy face or heart emoji. Just this gif. I was just a pure joy killer. I will let you just sit with that. That can be the spirit of the guy who stands before you most weeks.

If I can't sing songs of joy, then I am going to make things difficult for others as well. Bitterness, sorrow, frustration, stress in our hearts can create

unpleasantness in the lives of others. I see it all the time. Do you ever get dumped on by people who are just unhappy, critical people? They feel that it is their duty and right to make sure everyone else is unhappy as well? Chronic complainers or critics.

Joylessness begets joylessness and it leads you down a road of despair and exile. Listen to the cry of the Israelites. Weeping and wailing by the rivers of Babylon. Since we are in such misery God, they continue in

*Psalm 137:7-9*

*7 Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!" 8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. 9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

Wow! Their lack of Joy compelled them to wish nothing but heartache upon others. This is a rather bizarre ending to this Psalm but it does seem to fit the mood of the overall lament. The Edomites, were supposed to be a southern ally of the Israelite people but they end up betraying them and the people of God are so bitter about it. They wish for nothing more than to see the Edomites fall hard. They are pleading for God to remember their act of betrayal and punish them. And then the Psalmist's focus shifts to the Babylonians, the very ones who are mocking and tormenting their Israelite captives. These are the ones who overthrew Jerusalem. Slaughtered their people. Desecrated their temple. Uprooted the survivors from their homeland and carried them away in slavery to a foreign land, In the rawness of their pain and misery, those in exile by the Rivers of Babylon, they cry out to God a curse upon these despicable Babylonians,

*God may you seize their babies and slam them against the rocks.....*

And the psalm ends. The poem ends. And that would be a pretty bizarre way to end if the overall story ended there. But it doesn't.

Because God has been at work the whole time, God has not left them alone. Babylon is a brutal chapter in a grander story. Have you had a brutal chapter in

your life story to this point? A death? A marriage break-up? A sickness? It doesn't have to define you. God has written a much bigger story.

North Park hosted a funeral this week. It was for a 63-year man whose own life story was quite public. He was in a prominent position in his workplace and was caught embezzling funds. He was publically humiliated. Sentenced to time in jail. Forced to pay back the money. Babylon. A brutal chapter in his life that had repercussions. But, God redeemed this man. Truly repentant. He spent the remainder of his life, serving God and serving others with a joy filled spirit. Humbled and obedient to God's story and on Friday, his life was celebrated instead of condemned. Babylon didn't define him.

The larger story is of a redemptive God, who doesn't leave us where we are. He hears the cries of his people, and saves them.

Which leads us to Christmas. To Bethlehem. To God breaking through the sorrow and despair. His kingdom coming to earth, in the form of a baby, his son, Jesus. It is the high point of the story. In fact, the birth of Jesus is announced to the world by these interesting words in,

*Luke 2:10-11*

*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. Jesus, is the good news that will cause great joy for all people.*

Do you know that the root word for joy in the Greek language is chara, which is closely related with the Greek word charis which means grace? Joy is both a gift of God as well as a response to the gifts of God. And Jesus' life and ministry exuded grace filled joy.

In *John 15:9-11*, Jesus says to those around him, *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

Remain in me, in my love, obey my commands and my joy will be in you.

I came across this definition of joy this week that I really like. It says that Joy is, the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.

I want to be candid with you and maybe challenge you today. I think as those who proclaim to be Christians, followers of Jesus especially in this North American culture we live in, we can all too easily forget our Joy. The source of our Joy. I think we have become apathetic to that earthshattering global proclamation made in Bethlehem 2000 years. That the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ is good news of Great Joy? I think that message can fall on deaf ears sometimes and this is why.

I think for some of us, we are still stuck. Do you remember those biblical places I mentioned earlier in this message? I think some of us are stuck in Eden. In our sin and in our misery. Or others of us, we are still stuck in Egypt, in our slavery and oppression to someone or something. Or others are stuck in Sinai. We are paying lip service to God but really with our time, talent and money, we are worshipping other things, other gods. Or we are stuck in Babylon. In our despair, our weeping and wailing. Stuck in our bitterness and our attitude is, the world has been harsh to me, so I am going to make things difficult for others. And in all of these places that we are stuck, we have forgotten our story. The story of God in our lives. The story of humanity doesn't end in Eden, Egypt, Sinai or Babylon. It continues to Bethlehem and then to Calvary and on to the rest of our lives.

*Hebrews 12:2*

*For the joy set before him he (Jesus) endured the cross, scorning its shame, to give his life for our sin. So that new life is possible for us, through him.*

Joy, true Joy is only found "in Christ". If we try to find it anywhere else, we forget our story and end up lost and in exile or stuck in Eden, Egypt, Sinai or Babylon. Focused more on our difficulties than Jesus, the source of our Joy.

Do you know, this Christmas, I think it is time to bring down our harps. I think some of us have hung up our harps. We have forgotten our joy. We have forgotten how to praise God with our lives. Our hands are immobilized. Our tongues are stuck to the roof of our mouths. It is time for us to sing, with our lives surrendered to God. To remember our story and to remember that although life is not easy and we will all have obstacles to face, our God has sent Jesus to come to save us. True joy is available through him. Can you get excited about that?

Doesn't it make you just want to jump out of your seat and clap your hands and sing a song? Doesn't it make you want to jump out of bed in the morning and see all that God has to offer you each day? And this is not to make light of anyone who is stuck, anyone who is dealing with difficult situations, anyone who can't sing today. But this is where the community of God comes in. We are to surround and embrace one another. Intercede for each other when things seem joyless. Pray for each other when the words don't seem to come so easily. The church's role is to support and care for each other and whomever God brings into our lives. The church's role is to sing for others when they can't find their voice.

And our mission is to remind each other and the world of the message of Joy that God brought through his son Jesus. It is the purpose for which we live, it is why God has left us on earth. To sing, with our mouths and with our lives, and to encourage others to sing as well. Isn't that exciting? Our world can be a sorrow filled place sometimes can't it? But Jesus has overcome our world. When we set our hearts on Him and invite him to live in us through the Holy Spirit, he will take away our fear and Joy cannot help but be a by-product in our lives for all to see. May you experience the joy that is available through Christ this Christmas. And may we look for intentional ways to sing, with our mouths and our lives, as we head out into our world this week. Amen.

## **Points to Ponder**

### ***Leaning into Christmas***

#### **Joy vs Sorrow**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. Discuss significant places in your life. What are those locations where important things happened? What are ways that you experienced God's provision in those places and times in your life?
2. Have you ever been in exile? Separated from the familiar? Or just lost. Share some of your experiences during that period of your life.
3. How has sorrow interrupted your life? Have you ever felt so downcast that you wondered if you would ever be happy again? Did your disposition impact those closest to you? Describe some of those experiences with your group.
4. What is Joy to you? What does the angels' declaration that Jesus is, *good news that will cause great joy for all people*, mean to you?
5. Have you ever been stuck in Eden? Egypt? Sinai? Babylon? What was it that allowed you to move forward? What does it mean to you that true joy is found in Christ?

#### **Prayer and Action Item**

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for those who may be experiencing a lack of joy these days. Pray that Jesus may be our source of joy and not fleeting circumstances or situations.