



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
*Church of Hamilton*

# “Joy Before the Resolution”

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**LUKE 2:8-11**

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Please be seated. And please turn with me in your Bibles today to the Gospel of Luke. Our text today is probably one of the most beloved and familiar Christmas passages---Luke 2:8-11. You'll also find that text printed for you in your bulletin. If you're just visiting with us, we are in the third Sunday of Advent and we've come this morning to the third theme of Advent, which is joy.

But listen, I recognize that for several people who do not consider themselves Christians, putting Christianity and joy in the same sentence seems kind of ridiculous. I remember speaking with a gentleman on an airplane. We were sitting together and he soon found out I was a pastor. This is always an interesting moment for me because you can see the look on their faces. They're like—"Oh no! 3 hours next to a clergy member and I can't move." Well, in the course of our conversation he said, "You know, I could never become a Christian because I actually wanna be happy in life." You see for him, and I believe he represents the opinion of many others, God is sort of looked at as a cosmic killjoy. Following Jesus, becoming a Christian, that's not going to lead you into joy, it's going to rob you of joy. Isn't that what so many people think? Well, what I hope to show you this morning is, in fact, the very opposite is true.

*Read Text: Luke 2:8-11*

So, I wonder, when you think of the church or Christians, or Christianity, do think of joy? When you think of God and the very heart of God, do you think of joy? In your mind's eye is God joyful? Is Jesus happy? Do God and gladness go together?

Well according to the Bible, God and gladness not only can but should go together. All throughout the Old Testament God is described as a God of joy. We're told that God rejoices over us with loud singing. And in Psalm 16 we read that in his presence is fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore. So, it makes sense that when God comes to this earth in the person of Jesus, when he's born into the very world he created, what is the heart of his birth announcement? Joy! Behold we bring you good news of great—not just joy—great joy! God and gladness go together. Jesus and joy go together.

And in case you're thinking that I'm making too much out of this one mention of joy. This isn't some random one-off verse. Do you remember, what was Jesus' first recorded miracle? When Jesus busts on the public scene and lets the people know what he's all about, what does he do? He turns the water into wine. Think about that. Here is God incarnate himself at a wedding party and they've run out of wine and what does he do?

God doesn't say, "Oh good you all were having way too much fun anyway. I'm glad that's over with." No, he makes more wine and the best wine anyone's ever tasted. And it wasn't about the drinking; wine in the ancient world was the universal symbol for joy. What is he saying to us? What is showing us? At least this—that the wines of this world, the pleasures of this world are going to run out on us. They're fleeting. But he can offer us a joy that will never run dry. Remember his parables in Luke 15? Jesus talks about the joy of heaven when the lost are found. Remember the father's house? What was it filled with? Music and dancing. It was filled with joy. And the father as we know was an image of God. And what did Jesus say in the upper room? John 15:11—"I have told you these things so my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."

See what this means? It means that if you and I don't think of Christianity and joy as synonymous, then it must mean we are misunderstanding Christianity. And unfortunately, I would say that's the case with far too many people—the version of Christianity that they're rejecting is actually a false version. It's not the real thing, because if you discover the real thing, if you encounter the real Jesus, he will inevitably bring you joy. That's what the angels were saying; that's what the entire Bible is saying.

And to explore this a bit and to try and explain and apply this, what I'd like to do is look at this great theme of joy under two main headings: the essence of joy and the experience of joy. In other words, what is it and how do we get it? What is this Christmas joy that Jesus has come to bring? What's the nature or essence of joy? And then second, how do we experience it? How can this joy become ours more and more?

**FIRST: THE ESSENCE OF JOY:** It's always helpful if we're able to, to start off by trying to define our terms.

So, what is joy? What is this great joy that the angels are proclaiming here? Well, I want to give you a theological and working definition of joy and then try to tease it out a little bit.

Joy we could say is a deep inner satisfaction that provokes within us the pleasurable assurance and ache for it's ultimate source. Let me say that again: Joy is a deep inner-satisfaction that provokes within us the pleasurable assurance and ache for it's ultimate source.

So, the first thing we need to understand about joy is that it is a deep inner-satisfaction, which is related to happiness but it's different and deeper than happiness. Happiness is based on how you happen to be feeling in the moment or what is currently happening in your life, but joy is something deeper. Joy is something more abiding.

Just ask George Bailey. Remember George on the bridge and he's crying out after he was able to see what the world would be like if he wasn't born? He's crying out, "I want to live again, I want to live again!" And then when Burt the cop calls him by name, George suddenly realizes he's George again. He's known again. He has his life again. And he says, "Burt, do you know me?" And suddenly what George experiences in that moment is a joy that transcends his circumstances. It's a joy before the resolution. Because remember at that moment his mouth is still bleeding, his car is still wrecked, and as far as George knows, he still owes the \$8000 and is most likely going to prison but it doesn't matter why? Because George has this deep inner satisfaction in the grace of life and the things that matter most. And you could even say that in that moment George knows, through Clarence's intervention in his life, that God is for him not against him and it fills him with this deep inner satisfaction. It's a joy that goes beyond the happiness of positive circumstances.

I've explained this once before like a beach ball. Joy is like this inner buoyancy of spirit that no matter what is pressing us down, no matter what pressure we happen to be under, our hearts can have this power and strength of contentment that can eventually bring us afloat. Just like we know that there can be organic life beneath the snow fall, joy is this deep inner satisfaction that can exist beneath the fall of tears and the wintery sorrows of life. So, that's the first part of its essence, its nature—joy is a deep inner satisfaction, a deep undercurrent of heart contentment.

But it's more than that. What C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, Tolkien, Luther, Augustine and many others have pointed out is that this inner satisfaction also provokes within us a holy discontentment in the overall experience of joy.

It provokes within us the pleasurable assurance and ache for joy's ultimate source. What do I mean? Well, this is one of the great themes, if not the great theme in Lewis' writings. This is why his autobiography was titled "Surprised by Joy." Lewis tells this story of how when he was very little, his brother brought into his room the lid of a tin. And on this lid his brother had set up this little mini garden with moss, twigs and little flowers. And Lewis writes about how that one moment stuck in his imagination because the remnants of that garden and the enjoyment of that little garden on the lid was just the sign, it was just the assurance and promptings for the real garden somewhere else.

And this is why in his autobiography Lewis writes, "Joy is the experience of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." You see, for Lewis, joy wasn't just an inner satisfaction, it was the stab of longing for the source of where that satisfaction points us to. Every joy is just a signpost to it's source. And this is the reason that joy is both desirable and inconsolable at the very same time because the best of joys in this world are just the garden on the lid, not the garden itself. They're just the warmth and light of the sunbeam and rays, not the sun itself. And this pleasurable assurance and ache comes in a variety of forms.

Jerry Root, a renowned Lewis scholar, talks about the pilgrim longing—a longing to be home. The joy of being welcomed home, the joy of being known and loved and safe, although deeply satisfying, at the same time it provokes within us a longing for the ultimate homecoming. This is why G.K. Chesterton said we can be homesick even in our own homes. Or as Augustine put it, we can feel like pilgrims in our own land. Or the longing for *the* story. When you experience the joy of a fantastic story, you want to read it again or watch it. Why? Because it provokes within us an ache to

be in that world where good triumphs over evil and love gets the last word.

What is that? It's a longing for another world that we deeply recognize and enjoy in these stories but haven't experienced the reality of yet. Or there's the eternity longing. When you experience the joy of a restful day or hours where time just seems to stand still. It beckons within us the longing to be free from the shackles of time. Why? Because we are not just temporal creatures. God has put eternity into the heart of every person. There's the lover longing, the community longing, and friendship longing, the purpose longing. Each of these are deep inner satisfactions that provoke within us a holy ache to experience their ultimate source

And this is what is so staggering about the message of Christmas—it's that in Jesus, the source of all joys has come. The God of all heavenly joys has visited us our planet. What is heaven itself? Lewis talks about this. That it's like the door that our hearts have been knocking on our entire lives finally opening to us in Jesus.

So, we could say this is joy—a deep inner-satisfaction that provokes within us the pleasurable assurance and ache for it's ultimate source. It's a joy that can survive the worst of times. It's a joy that can give us a carol to sing not just in the light but in the night. All right, but how do we experience it?

**SECOND: THE EXPERIENCE OF JOY:** How do we taste this joy more and more? Well, I think the first thing we must have clear in our minds is that joy can never be sought after directly. Finding joy is like finding your car keys. I don't know about you, but when I lose my car keys I always seem to find them by looking for something else. Joy works in a similar way. Think about it, what do the shepherds do after they hear this message? They don't stand there and try to drum up this joy on their own. No, they go directly to Jesus. They encounter the message of grace, and person of Jesus and when they discover Jesus, it's then that they come back glorifying and praising God—full of joy! See, joy is always the byproduct of discovering something else.

And I would say that it's the byproduct of experiencing three main things: grace, Jesus, and fellowship. Now, where am I getting grace from this text? Well, look at what the angels don't say. The angels don't say, "Behold, we bring you good advice, or good tips and techniques for living, or good instructions, or even good commandments." No, what do they say? "Behold, we bring you good news." In other words, here is something that is happening is human history and it's happening for you. "Unto you is given!" What is given? Not primarily a teacher, not primarily a mentor or a life coach, but a savior. What is this? It's grace. The unmerited favor of God. And this is what leads us to joy.

What did we read earlier in the service? That even the Greek words themselves are related to one another. Chara (joy) is derived from Charis (grace) because joy holds hands with grace. It's grace that awakens our joy. Joy comes to us through the recognition and reception of grace. Again, this is what's at the very heart of George Bailey's story! What does George discover? The grace of life itself and this gift of life given back to him by God. He finally sees that this life is grace! And this is one of the reasons why Christianity and joy go hand in hand. Every other religious system or spiritual philosophy says this is what you've got to do. It offers you something you must do, some path that you've got to follow, some set of rules and techniques that you've gotta keep in order to secure the divine favor. But only Christianity offers us the free grace of God. Listen to author Bob Welch:

"The material world of old man Potter says if your net worth is this much, you have arrived, if you use this product, you will be popular. If you live in this neighborhood, you are somebody. If you win this award, then your worth is finally validated. The world demands that you do something to earn favor and acceptance. But God doesn't work this way. His favor is a gift of grace. And when that message hides itself in our very hearts it fills us with the same kind of wonder that filled George as he raced home in the snow late on that Christmas Eve, full of joy realizing he had once been lost but now is found."

I remember when I was in college a bunch of us in my philosophy class had bombed this exam and the exam was worth 75% of our final grade. And I remember our professor Dr. Silber standing up and addressing the class after we all came back with our heads down. And he said, "About that exam, I've decided not to count that exam against your final grade." Now, what were we all feeling in that moment? Salvation, relief! We were feeling joy because what were we getting? Grace!

And this is what leads us to Jesus, because Jesus is the greatest gift of God's grace. Who is Jesus? He is the very one who came to bear the penalty of our impoverished moral record on the cross. And then he grants to us his perfect moral record to our account. Could you imagine God saying to you, "All your failed attempts, all your failed tests, every wrong answer and action, I'm not going to count it against you. None of it is going to be counted against your final grade!" Wait, what? Why? How? How is that possible? Because the gospel of Jesus is a gospel of grace. Because it was all counted against Jesus at the cross, none of our sins will be counted against us. Because it was all condemnation for him on the cross, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Through faith in him, not faith in what we offer to God but in what God offers to us, we can be forgiven and free. And we can have this deep inner satisfaction in God, that the most important relationship in this universe has been restored. And at the same time it beckons within us a longing to experience the full realization of that.

How do we experience joy? Receive God's grace for you in Jesus. Joy isn't based on what we're going through; it's based on what we're going to. Go to Jesus. We are creatures of joy but not creators of joy. Joy is not a product that we can buy at the stores; it's the byproduct of something else ---grace, Jesus, and lastly...Fellowship. The ongoing joy that's offered to us in Christianity is communion, it's fellowship, it's a growing relationship with the God who made us and loves us. But how does that happen? How does any fellowship happen? Through two-way communication.

And I'll close with this – I recently shared this with our staff. It's the true story behind the hymn—Revive us again. It was based on the verse that says, "God, revive us again that your people may rejoice in you!" It was written by a Scottish physician named Dr. William MacKay. And here's a summary of the story in the hymn-writers own words...

My dear mother had been a godly woman, quite often telling me of the Savior, and many times I had witnessed to her wrestling in prayer for my soul's salvation. But nothing had made a deep impression on me. The older I grew the more wicked I became. Years later when I was a doctor....a seriously injured laborer was brought into the hospital. The case was hopeless. He was surely dying. His only wish was to see his landlady, because he owed her a small sum of money, and He also requested that his landlady send him what he called, "The Book." I went to see him on my regular rounds at least once a day. What struck me most was the almost happy expression on his face. After the man died, some things about the deceased's affairs were to be attended to in my presence. "What shall we do with this?" asked the nurse, holding up a book in her hand. "What kind of book is it?" I asked. "It's the Bible of the poor man. As long as he was able to read it, he did so, and when he was unable to do so anymore, he kept it under his bed cover." I took the Bible and – could I trust my eyes? It was my own Bible! The Bible which my mother had given me when I left my parents' home, and which later, when short of money, I sold for a small amount. My name was still in it, written in my mother's

hand. I looked upon the precious Book that had given comfort and refreshing to this unfortunate man in his last hours. And this Book, the last gift of my mother, I had actually sold for a ridiculous price. Well, be it sufficient to say that I regained possession of my Bible and it was the cause of my conversion."

And it was the cause of his rejoicing. And the means of fostering a fellowship with God through the word of God that brought him much joy. This is the essence of joy and these are the stepping stones to joy: grace, Jesus, and fellowship with God because indeed, Christianity and joy, they go together.