



December 12, 2021

John 1:9-13 - Born of God

Advent Theme: Joy

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Let's pray.

We are going to John 1 today.

When the angel announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the verse we read together, he said

Luke 2: 10b“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

When Jesus was announced, when Christianity was kicked off, the angel said this is good news (Gospel), and it is news of great joy. This baby in the manger would bring a lot of things to earth. But the angel was sure to mention the joy. Good news was coming, news of great joy.

But so often, our religion doesn't seem to look like good news of great joy. In fact, you could argue that religion has done more harm than good in the world. Geopolitically, look at all the wars that are fought over this stuff. It seems like we might get along better without it.

This is why John Lennon wrote his song “Imagine” - to dream of a world where we didn't believe in this stuff. You know the lyrics, but he sings:

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try

No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people living for today
Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace

He can sing a beautiful song about how peaceful and good the world would be without religion.

So why did the angel and John Lennon disagree so severely? The angel says its good news of great joy, and Lennon's experience was "we'd have a whole lot more joy without it."

And we don't have to look out at the world to see the joylessness of religion. Most of us have probably known the bitter, angry Christian. Who seems like he or she would have been better off if it weren't for Christianity. And some of us, at dark moments, might even wonder if that wouldn't have been true for us. Maybe we'd have more joy without it.

But by faith we believe the Bible. The angel got it right and Lennon got it wrong.

One of the reasons our Christianity is not a source of joy is because often our Christianity isn't Christianity. It is just one more set of moral laws.

But at the heart of Christianity is GRACE. The relationship with God and eternal life with God that is given, not to the good, but to those who recognize that they are bad and throw themselves on Christ for mercy. Grace is almost too good to be true. We should never believe this if it weren't announced by the guy who rose from the dead. It's way too good.

The biggest reason for our joylessness in our Christianity is that our Christianity is not Christianity. It's just another tired old burdensome moralistic religion.

It's just rule keeping and law keeping and working to be good or wise or successful. It's "do more, try harder." And it's not that we shouldn't have holy grief over our sin. We

should - but the depth of that grief should give us all the more appreciation for the grace and forgiveness that is ours in Christ.

And the fact that Christ broke into our world so that we could be forgiven, and so that one day all of creation could “repeat the sounding joy,” is the best news that we could hear in yet another season dominated by bad news. And so this morning in John 1, I hope we hear that Christmas is incredible news for us, not because Jesus brought a great new law, but because he gave the scandalous grace of the Gospel.

One author wrote, *“I think good preachers should be like bad kids. They ought to be naughty enough to tiptoe up on dozing congregations, steal their bottles of religion pills, spirituality pills, and morality pills, and flush them down the drain.”*¹

So if I could be that bad kid today, steal those religion pills and flush them down the drain, knowing I need my religion pills to be flushed down the drain as well, it would be my joy.

John 1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

This passage has good news, bad news, more good news, and even better news.

So let’s start with the first good news in verse 9:

John 1:9 “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”

Jesus gives light to everyone.

When Jesus came into the world at Christmas, it was to bring light to all, without distinction. He didn’t just come for the Jews. He didn’t just come for one race or one nation or people from one religious background. He came to bring light to all.

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching*, p.14

He came as universal truth, the Savior to all people who would believe in Him. And made an offer to all: believe and be saved, trust and be relieved:

Revelation 22:16-17 “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”
17 The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”

Jesus shines His light into the world and invites everyone to come to Him. The true light enlightens everyone.

So this is great news if you're hungry, thirsty, weary, hopeless, needy, sinful, and in need of redemption - Jesus is the one who saves all who would believe and He invites you to come.

So Christmas is incredible news: the True Light enlightens everyone.

That's incredible news. But there's a little bit of bad news:

Verse 10 and 11:

John 1:10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

The bad news is that Jesus, though bringing light to all and an invitation to all, was not known when he came, and wasn't received when he came.

What's up with that? The creator of the world takes on flesh, steps in to live among us.

This is what should work!

There's a story of a farmer, who goes out to his barn on a cold winter's night with the wind howling. And he sees some birds out in a tree outside his barn, and he thinks they must be freezing out here. So he opens up his barn doors to let them in, and the bright light from the barn scares them off. They only fly off into the cold to a farther away tree. So he grabs a broom to try to shoo them in, and nothing works. And the farmer thinks, "If

only I could become a bird, then I could communicate with them and lead them into the barn.”

Jesus “became the bird.”

But still, we didn’t receive Him. Why?

1) One reason is internal hostility -

Colossians 1:21-22 “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,”

We are not really apathetic like we think, but hostile toward Jesus. It might look like apathy, but then our true feelings about Him come out during hard times, we are put under pressure and we lash out at God or refuse to believe because of hard times.

2) Another is we are slaves to sin -

Romans 6:17 “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,”

We are enslaved to sin - we’re addicted to it, we are bound to it. And we love it. We love ourselves as leader, Lord, and master.

Often we think people are neutral, and when offered salvation in Jesus, we’ll either sign up to be servants of Jesus or harden our hearts and become slaves to sin. But the Bible talks about all who don’t know Jesus as already slaves to sin. We’ve already signed up.

When Jesus invites us we are not in a neutral position, we’re already barreling down the highway in the opposite direction. So much of life is already being lived for self that to shift it into reverse would destroy the transmission.

3) And maybe worst, Another is our own dead condition-

Colossians 2:13 “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,”

We are not spiritually sick and in need of some meds, but spiritually dead and unresponsive.

So on our own, we're a hopeless wreck. Jesus certainly died for us and invites us all to life. He really enlightens everyone. But we are dead, and dead people don't respond. There are just no takers.

Romans 3:10-12 “None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

Jesus makes a legitimate offer - whoever comes to me will find what his soul is after.

And our response is crickets. A universal offer is met with universal rejection - no.

If all Jesus did was die for everyone, rise again, and invite everyone, that would be an incredibly gracious amazing gift. That nobody would receive. Nobody would come to Jesus.

And when we say this, you will probably push back with “but I have free will.”

I would start by saying, “Make that case from the Bible.” The Bible talks about our slavery to sin or slavery to Christ, but doesn't talk about any free in-between state. Sin is our master and we do what it tells us, we don't respond to another master.

But even if we grant it...even if we grant that our will is completely free, the problem is that free will doesn't get us to Jesus if we are naturally hostile to him.

If you have in front of you (and this is from Tim Keller whose teaching on this is excellent and that I've borrowed in some other places for today) -

If you have in front of you two plates. One has chocolate cake and the other has something disgusting - a plate of vomit - even if you *have free will*, you will choose the cake 1000 times out of 1000. It was a free choice, nobody held a gun to your head and

made you choose the cake, but you are naturally hostile to and repulsed by the vomit and attracted to the cake so of your own free will you always choose the cake. *

And even if you have free will, but Jesus looks to you like a plate of vomit, your free choice doesn't get you to Jesus. We're repulsed by Jesus and hostile to Him. Because we're dead and hostile, even though He is the one our hearts need, we are disgusted by him and always choose against Him. We really are slaves to sin - chained by our desires.

It would require a massive change of desires and a breaking of chains for us to freely choose Jesus. Which doesn't ever come out of our human hearts.

So John says, **“11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11).**

Which is hopeless for us. But then he offers this hope:

John 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God

But God is a God who takes a hopeless, helpless condition and breathes hope into it. Who raises the dead to life. Again

Colossians 2:13 “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,” (Colossians 2:13)

Yes, it is a hopeless situation because even when Jesus came to his own, his own didn't receive Him. BUT - there are some dead people that Jesus raised from the dead, forgave our trespasses, and gave us life.

So we had the good news that Jesus gives light to all, the bad news that we reject Him, and now the good news that if we will receive Him He will make us sons and daughters of God.

So John says, “his own didn't receive Him. But if they did, they became sons of God.”

And John defines for us what it means to receive Jesus:

John 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God

To receive Him is to believe in His name

We aren't all children of God by default. We become Children of God.

We don't become children of God by a prayer we pray, an aisle we walk, the water we're dunked in, the amount we give, the amount we know, the moral achievements, by the social achievements, by church attendance and involvement, or by political wins.

We could never earn Him, so we receive him by faith.

We receive Jesus and become sons and daughters of God by believing. By faith.

But what is saving faith?

Because the Bible talks about faith that can't save you.

James 2, verses 14 and 19 talk about a faith that can't save, and a kind of believing that even the demons have.

So it's important that we have real saving faith because that's the only way we receive Christ and become the sons and daughters of God.

1. Saving Faith must have the right object²

Faith by itself, belief by itself, is not necessarily good. Just like love by itself isn't necessarily good, and hate isn't necessarily bad. Love is good if you love your spouse, but love is bad if you love to shop-lift.

Hatred is bad if it is directed to a person, but good if it's directed at your sins or toward injustice in the world. (In that sense we all need to hate a whole lot more.)

And faith is good if it has the right object - if you believe in Jesus. But can be a bad thing:

² "Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying 'I.'" - Simone Weil

If you believe the crazy promises of a phony faith healer or televangelist and send in your money, we wouldn't say "at least you had faith." We'd said your faith was misplaced and wasn't good.

BIG FAITH in BIG LIES will let you down in REALLY BIG WAYS.

So faith isn't good or bad by itself, it depends on the object. It isn't faith in general that saves us.

It is Jesus who saves us through faith in Him.

If you have lots of faith that you can fly, and you jump off a cliff, after the elation of feeling like you were right for a couple of seconds, you soon realize that, even though you had faith, you aren't flying. You had bad faith because it was in a bad object.

But if you go to the airport and sit in a 747, with faith in the 747 to make you fly, then your faith is (probably) well placed, and as a result of believing in that right object of faith, you fly.

If the object of your faith can save you, you are saved. If not, you are not, even if your faith is strong.

Faith in Jesus, whether it's weak or strong, gets you in Christ. And though you have your fears and doubts and sins, Christ is strong. It's the faithfulness of Jesus that saves you, not the perfection of your faith.

So saving faith has to have the right object. And also, we shouldn't confuse saving faith with a work or a virtue. Faith isn't the good part we do to contribute to our salvation - nothing in us can save us or rescue us. Faith is the empty hand that receives Jesus.

2. Saving Faith isn't a work or a virtue

Faith isn't a thing we do or a feeling we have to work up. It is an empty hand that receives something, it isn't that something.

If you're exercising and it isn't making any difference: you aren't running farther, you aren't lifting more weight, we would tell you to work harder. That's how we treat work.

But we can't really tell you to believe harder. Because believing isn't a work or a virtue. It is coming to Christ empty, but making Him the one your faith receives.

So saving faith has to have the right object, it has to be in Jesus, but it shouldn't be confused with something we do or earn, it isn't a work or a virtue. What is it?

Historically, faith that saves has been thought to consist of:

3. Saving Faith is Knowledge + Assent + Trust

Faith is like a three legged-stool that has to have all three of these legs.

A. Knowledge

Because faith is only good if it is in Jesus, you have to have knowledge of Jesus. You have to have knowledge that we are sinful, knowledge that He is loving, knowledge that He died, knowledge that He rose. You have to know the story. Not all of it, in fact not very much of it, but enough to open the empty hand of faith to it.

And this is why faith isn't opposed to facts. Sometimes we think that if we are learning things about Jesus, or studying doctrine, or reading history or apologetics, that we will be so full of facts that there won't be any room for faith.

But faith doesn't operate where there are no facts, faith is IN the facts, it opens its hand to the facts. The reason our faith opens up to Jesus is because of the facts of who He is.

And a big part of strengthening faith IS learning facts.

If a person is about to go in for heart surgery, and he is nervous and you go in to sit with him, if you say "just have faith", that probably won't calm his nerves. But if you pull up the doctor's reviews online, and show that he has done this surgery thousands of times, that the outcomes are almost always positive - 1950 out of 2000 have turned out perfectly. That can actually calm the patient down and build faith. Because you're showing that this doctor is someone he can believe in. You don't tell him to just close his eyes and keep repeating "I believe." You are giving him something to believe in.

And we spend a lot of time teaching about Jesus, teaching the facts, we even want our songs to teach like the Bible says they should, because the more we perceive the reliability of Jesus, the more we trust in Him.

You see this in the beginning of Luke's gospel. Luke is writing to someone named Theophilus and he says:

Luke 1:3-4 "it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Faith, "certainty", is built by giving an orderly account of the facts about Jesus.

Christianity is built not on feelings, but on historical facts: Christ came, lived perfectly, taught perfectly, died on the cross in history, was buried, and rose again. These are events that happened, and that's where we place our faith.

Faith isn't grown by working directly on faith: just believe more, believe harder, make your faith bigger. Faith doesn't work on itself directly. We don't have faith in our faith. We have faith in Jesus.

Faith comes by looking outside ourselves.

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17)

We can agonize about our faith wondering if I have it - like it's a thing or a substance. When it isn't.

You are actually the least aware of your faith when you have the most of it, because then you're just very aware of God's faithfulness. Faith doesn't gaze in a mirror, it gazes at Christ. And theology, bible study, reading about Christ, singing rich songs about Christ, all serve to build the knowledge component of faith.

So faith is the empty hand that opens to the knowledge of Christ. Faith includes knowledge.

But also

B. Assent

You need to not only know some facts about Christ, but agree with them. People can know Christianity inside and out, but disagree that the story is true and the facts are real. You can have really good theology even if you're not a Christian. Because saving faith isn't just knowledge, but it is also assent - agreeing with what you know.

But even that - knowing Christ is real, and agreeing with the claims of Christianity, isn't saving faith.

So far you have heard the doctor describe your condition and what will cure it, you agree that the cure he prescribed will work, but you still need to take the medicine.

And that's the third leg of the stool:

C. Trust

Knowing about Christ, agreeing with the Gospel message, and now relying on Christ and his mercy for our righteousness. Hanging our hopes on it. Trusting in him, not just knowing about Him, not just agreeing that He is the one, but trusting in Him.

So we learn that Jesus is trustworthy, we agree that He is trustworthy, and then we trust him. And that's faith. So faith isn't something we do, it is the response of the heart to the perceived faithfulness of God.

We see Jesus as reliable to save us because he rose again, because he has always been faithful to his promises, and we hop on, and true to form, he saves us. He's the 747, and we can't fly but we are confident enough in Him to hop on and He does the flying for us.

So it's knowledge, assent, and trust.

But just in case there's any room in your mind to think my faith is something I did and can take credit for, the scriptures make clear that even faith, even having an open hand to Christ, is a gift of God.

Ephesians 2:8-9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

It's all a gift so we can never say that somebody was smart enough to believe in Jesus. It isn't a virtue of ours at all. Faith is not our contribution, it is a gift of God.

Which is why John says

John 1:13 "13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

We became Christians because it was God's will for us to become Christians.

And I think this was necessary because of the degree of our deadness.

I believe Jesus died for everyone. I believe he calls to everyone to believe - enlightens everyone. And everybody is legitimately offered salvation - many are called the Bible says.

But the call is not enough for the corpse.

We all run from the light, we won't respond to God's call, we're blind to its beauty.

But his love was relentless and He did even more.

He made a way for corpses to respond to his call to believe. A way for the blind to see the beauty of Christ. A way for those who by nature hate Christ to see him as beautiful enough to run to him.

He did for us from the outside what we never could have mustered up on the inside. HE willed that we would become sons and daughters of God, He gave us the gift of faith, and we received Him and became His kids.

We are Christians because He chose us. How unbelievably wonderful is that - that he would choose to save an enemy.

Take that in for a second if you're a Christian. When God saved you, he didn't just give you an offer that you considered, weighed out, and wisely chose. He raised you from the dead. He turned you from a sworn enemy to a friend. And it was all because He willed it, not because we did. It is an absolute miracle of God that you believe.

And when we receive Him, He doesn't just commit to tolerate us for all eternity and allow us into heaven as long as we don't bother Him. We become children of God.

Listen to what John says later in his letter, 1 John:

1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

So he says, "Look at the love the Father has given to us: we have been called children of God. He's amazed that we have become God's children, because that means that God has become our Father.

He took his hardened enemies and made us sons and daughters.

Which means we have access to Him. We have a listening ear. We have an infinitely powerful one who is always working for our good.

And you don't earn a Father, you're given one at birth.

So we have an inseparable relationship with our Father.

So this is good news from top to bottom.

That Jesus came to dwell among us, to die for us, even while we wouldn't receive Him. And if we believe, it is because He gave us the gift of faith. And with that saving faith, we are made children of God.

He has brought us from death to life.

From enmity to being His children.

And John says, "See what kind of love this is. Look at this! What kind of goodness must there be in God that He would, in His grace, make his enemies His children willingly."

And there's our reason for joy.

Not because we're now living up to the standard. Not because we've learned the rules. Not because we are doing a great job being great Christians who are better than everyone else.

But because He has made us children of God, not by our works, but by giving us faith.

How freeing is that? And for all that saps our joy this season, how great is it that all who believe in Christ become sons and daughters of God?

Prayer of Confession - Adapted from a prayer book entitled Streams of Mercy by Barbara Duid.

What could we ever give to you in return for your greatest gift: your own Son? He is our peace and salvation, our Redeemer, our substitute. He stooped low to raise us up, was born like us that we might become like him. He united Deity and humanity, the Creator becoming created, so that one day we might shed our sinful flesh and be remade in his likeness. He worked out a perfect righteousness, which was given to us, so that we can draw near to you. When we cannot rise to him, he draws close and lifts us up to himself. God, these are tidings of great joy, and yet we often live without joy in our salvation. We find great joy in your good gifts without lifting our hearts to worship you, the giver of all good things..

O God, have mercy on us. Though we desire to please you, we are weak and sinful, unable to stand in obedience unless you lift us up. Forgive us for the sin that remains in us. Though it frightens and troubles us, you have defeated it completely, giving us perfect peace in Christ. Thank you that we are forever united to him-his obedience is our very own, and your delight in him is always bathing us with your Fatherly pleasure.

Enlarge our hearts to celebrate this good news of great joy; for we are barely able to grasp the enormity of our salvation. Settle our hope and peace in the love of Christ, and make his throne the pleasure ground of our souls. Help us to love those around us, drawing them into your family by caring and speaking of your greatness in wise and loving ways, always ready to share the great news, and eager to explain the hope that is in us. Help us to sing of your goodness, loudly in our souls and joyfully when we are together, with hearts that are undone by your love and kindness to us. In Christ's great name we pray, amen.

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why is our Christianity so often joyless?
- 2) How is it a source of joy to know that we are only Christians because of the will of God?
- 3) How are our lives different if we believe that our default mode is to “not receive” Christ but reject Him?
- 4) Define grace. How is it central to the Christian life?