

In a couple of weeks, millions of children will be participating in a centuries-old tradition. It is one that goes to bed in hope and wakes up in joy when that hope is fulfilled the next morning. That hope comes from the promise there is a good gift coming their way the next day, and the joy they experience is found both in the anticipation of the night before and the fulfillment of the next morning. They will wake up with a start...10:00-10:30 I'm sure...come running out of their room, wake up parents, and sprint to the tree looking to rejoice in how that promise was fulfilled. It is the glory of Christmas morning, and it is a picture of what can be in the Christian life. In the midst of our hope is found the source of our joy.

Who of you could use some more joy in your life? How is your joy meter reading these days? Joy is something we know we want more of but it's often difficult to explain and ascertain, particularly as the Bible talks about it. It's kind of like happiness, but happiness is emotional and fleeting. It's satisfaction, but that can bring up the idea of contentment, and joy is more about abundance than it is about the bare minimum. The Bible says **joy is delight and fulfilment in the presence and promises of God.** Joy is the echo of hope, because it's our heart's exhilarated response to what we know will be, and it is the fulfillment of hope, as we faithfully live for God's pleasure in light of God's already-answered promises.

But joy is no accident. Yes, it is an emotion, but it's also a state of being that must be chosen and pursued daily. The only things standing in between hope and joy for a child at Christmas is a restless night's sleep. For us, it is much more. For too many of us, we miss out on the joyful life because we look in the wrong place, let our circumstances dictate the state of our lives, or live in a way that prevents it. But Christmas shows us that joy is not conditional, nor does it come only when everything is alright. Joy is a gift from God available to us at all times, but it's one we must go to him to receive regularly. So, what is the hope from which this joy comes?

**[Micah 5:1-5] Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. <sup>2</sup> But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. <sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. <sup>5</sup> And he shall be their peace.**

The prophet Micah ministered at the same time as Isaiah (750 BC) and prophesied of trying times ahead. The southern kingdom would be besieged and ultimately defeated. You can read of its fulfillment in 2 Kings 24. A siege is when a city is surrounded by opposing troops, leaving nowhere to go and no hope. But there is hope. One day there would be born a king who will turn it all around. He comes from ancient days, literally "days of immeasurable time", and from a place you'd least expect a conquering king to be born: Bethlehem. But he will do more than defeat Israel's enemies. He is a shepherd-king, who will care for, know, and be known by his people and rule with grace, power, and love, and bring peace/shalom. He will come to make all things right and be near for his people to enjoy him. It's in that hope where our joy is found.

That promise was made 2,700 years, yet it's so good to hear now. It feels like we have been under siege, hasn't it? We are constantly surrounded by sorrow and suffering the last couple years and there doesn't seem to be a way out. Strains, delays, isolation, fatigue, and a news media who continues to feed us only the worst of news every day. But here's the grace of God. We may be tempted to talk about joy as if experiencing it means we must ignore or not be impacted by the reality of pain. But that's not how God talks about it! God takes the brokenness of the world seriously. So serious, in fact, he sent his Son to fix it. And because he did, joy is his gift in the midst of pain because his coming allows us to know him now and look ahead to when it won't be this way.

Do you believe that? Do you believe God has something to offer you in these difficult days? Or are you resigned to it, try to tough it out, or try to ignore it? The good news is there's another option, and if you know a joyful person, you know what it looks like. I have a sweet friend who is one of the most joyful people I know. She's getting up there in years, and she's had a tough go of it for a while. But it seems like the worse it gets, the more I see the joy she has. She doesn't dismiss her challenges. She owns them, she puts her hope in Jesus, she leans into him, and joy is the result. But it's something she has chosen. **Sorrow comes easy.** Just wake up tomorrow and ask, "How am I feeling?" It likely includes some sorrow. But sorrow can co-exist with joy, and the more we hope in this promise in the midst of sorrow, the more we can find joy. What do we do? How do we get there? Let's fast-forward 750 years and get an answer.

**[Matthew 2:1-6] Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' "**

There are two ways we can respond to this promise. One leads to joy, the other to misery. Let's look at the two groups, starting with the wise men. I, unfortunately, must begin by ruining some of your nativity scenes. This event is likely 1-2 years after the birth of Jesus. So if you have three wise men bowing down at the manger, it's wrong. Just find where east is in your house and put them over there! You'll hear more about these guys on the 26<sup>th</sup> but, for this morning's purposes, know these were learned men from the east, who **knew the Jewish scriptures, hoped in their promises, and were looking for their fulfillment.**

A light in the sky, perhaps the Shekinah Glory, an astronomical phenomenon or something else, grabbed their attention and inspired them to go. Their hope compels them to seek out the fulfillment of the promise because they want to experience the joy of being with, and worshipping, this child. **They may not fully know who he is, but they know enough to know he is worthy, and their lives will be different if they are near him.** But before that happens, they must choose to go.

Go back to the kids on Christmas morning. Their hope is meaningless if they don't come out of their room. If they don't move to receive their gift, they'll never receive it, and joy will have alluded them. Grace is free. Salvation is free. God's offer of himself is free. Joy is free. But it's not until you choose to receive it that you experience it. The wise men are our example of how it's done.

But there is another group responding to the promise. Herod and the priests know who this child is, the long-awaited Messiah, but they want no part of him. The wise men are hopeful, Herod and his priests are fearful, literally "terrified". The wise men are searching, Herod is scheming. The wise men want to worship, Herod wants to be worshiped. Herod was the tyrant ruler of Israel who desired to make much of himself. He would eventually order the execution of all babies two years and under because he believed the promised Messiah would get in his way.

When we desire to follow our own agenda, make much of ourselves, and live in disobedience, we put distance between us and God. **This is a pathway to a joyless life.** The best way to kill joy in your life is to see Jesus as a threat to it instead of the source. When we see God as the ultimate killjoy, we put our hope in other things. **Wherever you place your hope is what you are asking to give you joy.** If you struggle to seek that in God, I'm not suggesting you are a megalomaniac baby killer, but we can operate like Herod, try to work our way around God. But if we do that, we'll miss out on the joy that only he provides. So, then, what should we do?

**[Matthew 2:7-11] <sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.**

The star reappears and guides them to Bethlehem, the promised birthplace of this special child. **God wants to be found.** He wants us to find him, worship him, and experience the joy of knowing and being known by him. It's like texting someone your GPS location. It makes it easy to find that person, and Christmas is proof of God doing that. He is called Immanuel, God with us, and he came so that we could find him and know him. And what happens when we do?

The star finally settles over a house and the wise men know they have found him. Their response? Rejoicing exceedingly with great joy. The word for "great" is mega. They have found the one they were looking for, the one they were hoping in, the one they wanted to devote themselves to, and they go in and worship him and give him gifts fit for a king. **When you get Jesus, you get joy.** When you get Jesus, you get mega joy! If you struggle to believe that, find a joyful person in our church, ask them why, and I guarantee you will hear about their intimate relationship with Jesus, how they delight in him, and how they can't help but to rejoice always. You can have that too.

**Close the distance.** If your joy meter is running low, there's a good chance you are far from the source. You can't get warm if you don't stand close to a fire, and you can't get joy if you don't stand close to Jesus. Do you find yourself in the east, far away from God? Are you carving your own path, convinced it leads to true joy? How's that going for you? We are all there from time to time. The good news is Jesus wants you to find him. He may not put a light in the sky, but he has given you the light of his Spirit, the light of his Word, and the light of his people, this church. Pray God shows you the way back. Read his Word to see the joyful ways of Jesus. And don't go it alone. Notice there wasn't just one wise man. Let this faith family help guide you to him.

And if you've never found Jesus but want to, it starts by confessing you are a sinner, acknowledging you can do nothing to make up for it, and putting your faith in Jesus, that he died on a cross to pay for those sins and rose three days later. If you do that, he will take you who is far off and bring you near to him, and we will all rejoice with you in that.

**Fall on your knees.** I want to ask you an old question that is so fitting for this morning. If Jesus was all you got for Christmas, would you be satisfied? The wise men got joy because they went with the intent to worship Jesus. He was all they wanted. You want joy, empty your heart to the one who will fill it with himself. In John 15 Jesus said abide in me, and I in you, and my joy will be in you, and your joy will be full. Worship Jesus, experience joy.

**Joy can become a steady Godward disposition, orienting our hearts and including us toward him. It can be a foundational emotion. A shaping and empowering affection. It can be a current that flows steadily beneath the surface of all that we experience. This is not the joy of a spiritual novice, but of seasoned saints who have their spiritual sense trained, focused, and centered in God, and who can say, without hypocrisy, that they rejoice in the Lord always. -Rick Howe**

There are few good things in this life that we can attach the word "always" to, but joy is one of them. That can be true of every one of us in this room, but it comes with practice. Jesus is our hope, and because he is our hope, he is our joy. Seek him out and let him give to you what only he can provide.