

Our Better King

Advent 2020

ADVENT 2020: THE KING OF JOY

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Scripture Reference: Isaiah 9:1-7

Hi, I'm Kirsten and we're going to be reading scripture together today. We'll be reading from Isaiah 9:2-4, which is on page 331 of your Doxa Bible. Please stand for the reading of God's Word.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian." This is the Word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Good morning, church. My name is Ken Flower and I'm a part of our team here at Doxa. And this week we begin our third week of Advent focused on the beautiful theme of joy. Now, joy is an idea that you don't have to be a Christian to agree that this is supposed to be a part of the Christmas experience. Right? From early October, when the Christmas decorations start showing up in Costco all the way through Christmas, we see, and we hear through singing, through advertisements, through commercials, through it all, that joy is supposed to be part of what we're feeling and experiencing at Christmas time. And yet, if we're honest, I think if our world is honest, that we feel conflicted about this, because at the same time, we also feel a darkness. Many of us, especially at this time of year, and especially in 2020, we feel a darkness. We feel grief. We feel the weight of sadness. We wrestle with depression. We struggle with anxiety. We even wrestle with the shorter days and the darker mornings. Yet Advent doesn't tell us that we have to escape the darkness. And here's what's beautiful about Advent and why we can actually have true joy in the midst of it. Advent tells us that we can be honest about the darkness, which causes us to long for God to come and to act. To do something. And when he

does it, which is what Advent is all about, when the light enters the darkness, we get to experience true joy. The first thing we have to realize is that Advent always Begins in Darkness. I know for many of us life feels dark right now. I don't want to belabor this. I know we all feel this in many, many different ways, but tangible ways that 2020 has been an incredibly hard year. Life just feels hard right now. Life feels dark. And we may be wrestling with pain, with grief, with anxiety, with sadness in many ways that we don't even realize. Yet we can't talk about the coming of the light if we're not honest about the darkness that we're facing and that we feel. I know that some of us, and I would include myself in this as well, we fear facing the darkness. It's hard for us to actually be honest about the pain and the darkness that we feel because we're afraid maybe that we're going to be swallowed by it, overwhelmed by it, that we won't know what to do with the feelings that we're experiencing in the midst of it. And so maybe we just carry on and we get busy with all the busy-ness of Christmas, buying gifts, shopping, trying to connect with people in the ways that we're able to right now, cooking, eating, all of it. We stay busy with good things, wonderful things, but maybe we do these things in order to avoid really facing the pain and darkness that we feel inside.

And in my own story, I have been afraid to really face the darkness in my life and some of the pain in my own story. And this year through a series of events, God invited me to begin to actually process and be honest about some of the pain that I've experienced in my life and some of the darkness that I've seen in my story, and to actually begin to feel what I needed to feel, that I was afraid to feel, that I didn't know how to feel in those moments. I remember a Christmas back when I was I think about 13 or 14 years old, and we lived in Virginia, we were driving up into the mountains to go visit my sister and my sister is just a year and a half older than me, but she wasn't with us living in our home.

She was living in a psychiatric hospital for teens because at age 10 or age 11, she had been diagnosed with severe eating disorder, which then evolved and just completely changed her into wrestling with severe mental illness that she has completely been changed by in so many different ways. And I, as a kid, had to watch and see my sister struggling and wrestling and being changed. And to see my family, it felt like sometimes falling apart and being pulled apart at the seams by the hurt and the pain that we were watching my sister go through and just not even knowing how to help her. And I remember driving this Christmas to go visit her and we go into this just depressing looking building, and we bring gifts and we're trying to spend this meaningful time with her, but I just remember feeling so sad as I sat across the table from her. And I knew that we were then going to go then get in the car and drive to go see my grandparents and my cousins and aunts and uncles, but she wasn't going to go with us. That she had to stay there by herself.

And I felt this just pain and sadness and loneliness and fear.

And as God invited me this last year to actually begin to be honest about this sadness and to actually process what I was feeling in that moment, he helped me face this darkness. The good news was, and I'll share more about this later, that I was not alone. When I finally began to face the darkness in my own story, I wasn't alone, but we do have to face the darkness. And that's a reality of Advent is that it does begin in darkness. The passage you heard read earlier in Isaiah, Isaiah 9:2, he says a "people who walked in darkness", and then he talks about a people who were in anguish.

That they face a very tangible, real darkness at this time when Isaiah is writing to them. It's very real. Yet remember what pastor Jeff talked about with us two weeks ago? He said that we can't see the stars of hope. We can't see the light without looking at the past in the present darkness. In other words, we have to be honest about the darkness in our own story, and in our own life. We have to be honest about it in order for us to actually feel a need for God to come and change it. For God to come and act. And the good news is, when we begin to feel that need, and we begin to hope that God will come and act, the glory of Advent and the good news of Advent is that God acts. That God enters the darkness. That God comes to meet our need. He comes to meet our longing and to fulfill our hopes.

And that, friends, is where the joy of Advent comes from. It comes from knowing that God comes to meet our need. Now our culture, we want to embrace this idea of joy in our world, right? And our culture clings to this idea of joy. But in many ways, it's an imitation joy. It's a joy that comes from escaping the darkness, from trying to mask the darkness and staying busy through all of the busy-ness of Christmas. But in the end, all we're left with is empty boxes, a messy house, a half-dead tree, and then the dark days of January. And I know that sounds depressing, but I say that, all that to say, if our hope is only in the busy-ness of the season and the gifts and the food and the people, if that's what our hope is in to bring joy, then it's going to be short-lived because it doesn't meet our deepest need and longing. But the good news is that Advent does.

That through Advent, God comes to meet our deepest need and longing and can give us true joy. And before we go on, I just want to ask you, what part of the darkness in your own story and in your own life, do you need to face? That maybe you've been afraid. Maybe it feels overwhelming. You feel like you don't know how, and I don't, I don't say that you need to then go face that alone. Likely you need to bring others to face that with you and to process that with others. But is there a part of darkness, a part of your story, is there pain that you've yet to face? The good news is God wants to be with you in that.

And that's the good news of Advent, that even though it begins in darkness, it never stays there. That Advent always leads to the light entering the darkness.

Advent is the Dawning of the Light. Isaiah goes on to prophecy in verse two, saying that the people who've walked in darkness, he says they've "seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." And when Matthew wrote his gospel, hundreds of years later, and he wrote about Jesus and his ministry in verses 13 to 17 of Matthew chapter four, Matthew specifically talks about how Jesus was fulfilling Isaiah's direct prophecy right here. Jesus had just left Nazareth. He had gone into the land of Capernaum, which Matthew says is the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. And then he says, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

Jesus also understood that he was the one that was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus in John 8:12 says that "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus knew that he was the fulfillment of the hopes and longings of his people. that he was the light who had entered the darkness. Now remember when the shepherds were out on that hillside, right? This classic Christmas story that I think many of us know, and they were completely stunned by the appearance of this bright, glorious angel to the point where the angel tells them, don't be afraid because that would be your natural response. But then the angel goes on to say, "I bring you good news of great joy." Good news of great joy

"that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord."

You see the angels were announcing the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, the long expected one, the light that would come into the darkness. And the angels knew that this news, that the hopes of God's people being fulfilled in Jesus would lead to great joy for all people.

This is the source of Advent joy. Is our hopes being fulfilled by Jesus, the light who enters our darkness. Joy, friends, we experience Joy when our Hope is Fulfilled. And that's what Advent is all about. Isaiah goes on in his prophecy in verse three, he says, "You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice

before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil." You see, Isaiah here envisions this ever increasing joy for God's people. This multiplying joy. a joy that continues to grow and to grow. He gives three reasons here, I think, for why their joy continues to increase and grow and why they will experience a lasting joy When Advent comes. The first is because of God's provision. They will experience joy because God will provide. Verse three, He says, they'll experience joy as joy at the harvest time. Now for them, the harvest time was probably the most celebratory time of the year. It was a big party because they had labored to sow their crops and they had worked so hard to get them into the ground. But then largely after that, there was nothing they could do to ensure that their crops would grow successfully and that they would get to bring in a harvest. They waited and they longed, and they hoped that God would provide and meet their need, that he would bring the rain and that their harvest would come. And so when the harvest finally comes, it's a party. That they get to celebrate that they are going to be okay for another year. That God has provided. In many ways, I feel like this is where in some ways we are as a church right now in this month of December, as we await and hope that God will meet our financial need through the generosity of his people, we are hoping and waiting that God will provide. Well, joy, friends, joy comes, and we know that God provides for us. I just want to ask you, do you know that God knows the deepest needs and longings of your heart?

Do you know that he cares for you? Do you know that he's committed to meeting your needs and the proof of that is that he came at Advent to meet and fulfill our longings. He's committed to providing for you. The second thing that we see in terms of why their joy was going to increase and grow was not only his provision, but God would protect them. They would experience Joy Because of God's Protection. He goes on in verse three to say that they are glad as when they divide the spoil, right? This picture of the battle is done. And now they get to enjoy the spoil from the battle. And then he goes on in verse four, saying, "the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian." Now for them, when they heard the day of Midian, it would bring a tangible picture into their mind of a story they all knew well. Back in the book of Judges, when God's people were being oppressed by the Midianites and God raised up a man, he raised up Gideon to then bring together an army to go and fight the Midianites. And Gideon started with 32,000 people. An army that big to go and fight.

But before God sent them into battle, God reduced the army from 32,000 down to just 300 men. And then he sends these 300 men and it wasn't that they were like elite seasoned warriors. That wasn't the point. God sends 300 so that He could be the one that wins the battle for them. And in the end they went and they get to celebrate victory, but they know it wasn't because of their might. It wasn't because of their army. It was because God was with them and

He fought the battle for them. And He gained the victory. Now, Isaiah specifically is calling this picture in the mind to tell them that their joy, that they would get to experience a joy that comes from knowing that God will win the battle for them. That God will defeat their greatest enemies. That God will gain the victory.

Church, do you know that God is committed to you? That he will fight for you? That if he is for you, who can be against you?

The third reason, I think this is the most significant reason, that their joy is going to increase. It starts with knowing that God would provide for them. It also means that they knew that God would protect them and gain victory for them. But it wasn't just those things. The biggest reason is that God would come and be with them. He would give them his own presence. And it wasn't just that he would write their checks and make sure they stayed safe. He wanted to be with them. He loved them. He wanted to be in their presence and for them to get to experience his presence. He wanted relationship. He came to be with them. In verse six, Isaiah goes on to prophecy of a child that would be born. He says, "to us a child is born, to us a son is given" and "His name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

And when Isaiah's audience heard this prophecy of a child being born, immediately, they would begin to think of Isaiah chapter seven, just a little bit before where Isaiah told of a child who would be born and named Emmanuel, meaning God with us. See the greatest reason for joy and Advent is not just that we're provided for, it's not just that we are protected, but it is that God comes to give us his presence. He wants to be with us. I think we intuitively know this don't we? I mean we love to receive gifts and we love to give gifts, but ultimately what we really want is to be with people who love us. That we know that they're happy to be with us. And I know especially this year for many of us that we don't get to experience that in person, we would willingly and freely give up all of the gifts, if we could just be in the presence of those who love us deeply. True joy, friends, is connected to being with God, the one who gives us life.

Psalm 16: 11, the Psalmist says that "In your presence there is fullness of joy." Psalm 21:6 says that "You make him glad with the joy of your presence."

In the book, "The Other Half of Church", the psychologist Dr. Jim Wilder, and a pastor, Michael Hendricks, co-wrote this to talk about how our brains have been designed by God to experience joy when we know that someone is happy to be with us, that there's actually a measurable joy response in our brain when we are in the presence of someone who loves us and is actually happy to be there with us.

You know, as I begin to process the pain in my own story this past year, and begin to really be honest about some of the darkness in my story, and I began to feel what I was afraid to feel, or I didn't know how to feel for so many years, some of the loneliness and fear and sadness that I was experiencing as I faced the reality of my sister's illness and how that affected our family in so many ways. As I sat in that, and even I felt a sadness I had never felt before to the point where I sat there crying. But even in that moment, even as tears came down my cheeks, I felt a joy that I had also not felt in a long time. A joy because I knew in that moment that God was with me. That he was hurting for me. That he was sad for me. And not only that he was with me right then, but he was with me as that 13 year old boy who sat alone and afraid and scared and fearful and sad. That he was with me. That he was grieving for me. That he was hurting for me. That I was not alone.

There was an incredible joy that came to me, even as I felt the darkness, because I knew that I was not alone and that God was with me. And the amazing news of Advent, Church, is that God is with you. Whatever darkness you feel, whatever feelings you're wrestling with, whatever needs you're experiencing, God comes to meet your need. But most of all, he comes to be with you in the midst of it.

The good news of Advent is that Jesus comes to be with us. He's provided for us. He's provided everything we could possibly need. He's provided a righteousness that we did not have. He's provided to meet the deepest longings and needs of our hearts and souls. That he's come to protect us. He's come to defeat the greatest enemy. Sin and Satan and death has been defeated through Jesus, through his Advent, through his life and death and resurrection. And not only that he has come to be with us. This is the glory and the good news of Advent. This is why it is a time for joy, because God has come to be with us. That we're not alone. He wants to be with us. He's pleased to be with us. And he says that he wants to abide with us, to make his home with us, and invites us to make our home with him.

Now, you might be thinking that you believe all this, this is true, and yet you still feel this just absence of joy in your life. And you struggle to even know how do you begin to cultivate or increase the joy in your life. You just feel like there's a gap. Well I do think that there is a tangible way that you can begin to cultivate and grow joy in your heart and in your soul, that overflows into the rest of your life. So I want to share with you three specific, tangible ways I think you can begin to cultivate joy, knowing that God is happy to be with you. That he loves you, and he's happy to be with you.

The first is this, Practice Gratitude.

In the book I mentioned earlier, Michael Hendricks says that joy, or I'm sorry, gratitude, is the on-ramp for joy.

That gratitude and specifically taking time to remember and give thanks for the ways that God has provided, for the ways that God has protected, and for the ways that God has been present with you. To remember those times and give thanks for them. To be grateful for them. And to do it in very specific and tangible ways. Now, I would encourage you to even consider making a list of just specific moments in your life. If you can remember a time when you knew that God was with you and that you experienced joy because you knew that he cared about you, that he was happy to be with you, that he loved you, and that he was for you. If you can remember those moments of joy, write those down, and then come back to those on a regular basis and give thanks for those moments. For me, there's one that I recently added to my list of joy moments. When our family had just finished a week camping down at Mount Rainier, and we're full of just gratitude for a sweet week together, and we were also tired and dirty, but we were driving back from camping with the windows down, and blue skies, tired, but just hearts full, listening to U2 on full blast. Everyone in our family, singing, who knows what, none of us know the words, but we're all just like screaming at the top of our lungs. And I just remember this feeling of satisfaction and joy, knowing that God was pleased with us and was excited for us and happy to be with us in that moment. And I have to come back to moments like that and give thanks and remember the joy that God had given me.

The second thing I want to encourage you with, not only to practice gratitude, but Don't Walk Alone. Friends, the light has come into the darkness and there's no category for walking in the light by ourself. First of all, when we're in the light, God is with us, so we're not alone. But not

only that, when we're walking in the light, we then are in fellowship with the others who walk in the light with us. And there's no category for walking in the light alone. And yet some of us, I know are walking alone. In 1 John, John writes this letter and specifically talking to the church and encouraging them to walk in the light and telling them that when you walk in the light, you have fellowship with others and you can't walk in the darkness. And he goes on to say that he's writing these things so that their joy may be complete. In other words, he's tying their joy and them getting to experience the completeness of joy to them walking in fellowship with others and walking in the light with God. And if you are not walking with others, in other words, if you're walking alone, then you will not experience the fullness of joy that God has for you. You need to walk with others. And I know you might be thinking like, how do I do that? You might feel overwhelmed at that, that you long for community, but you feel like you don't know how to find it.

And I get that. And right now, especially is a hard time to find community. Let me just throw out a shameless plug. On January 24th, we are having our next community mixer, where we will have an opportunity for you to get together with other men and women from our church that are longing and hoping to find community. And we will talk more about what community at Doxa looks like and how you can connect in with men and women who want to walk with you so that you don't have to walk alone. Church we need this. You don't need to walk alone and your joy is connected to this. Now, the third thing I want to encourage you to practice is to Practice God's Presence. In John 15:11, as Jesus invites his disciples to abide in him, literally to make their home in him.

He says, "Abide in me and I in you." In other words, he's saying I'm with you. I have made my home with you. And now I want you as my disciples to actively abide in me. Make your home in me. To walk in my presence. To practice my presence. And then he says, in verse 11, "These things I've spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and so that your joy may be full." In other words, our joy is directly tied to us actively seeking to walk in the presence of God, to actively abide in him, to make our home in him. And you might be wondering how do I do that? That might feel very vague. Well, that's what these spiritual practices that we've been talking about as a church this year are all about. The goal of these is for us to get to experience the presence of God with us. Silence and solitude is all about carving out space and time to get away from the noise so that we can hear God's voice. That we can be with him. That we can receive his love for us.

Prayer is all about getting to listen to God. To bring our request to him and getting to hear his good word for us. Sabbath is all about carving out one time a week, where we enjoy his gifts and we get to enjoy his presence. And this, even this most recent quarter Bible reading, is all about learning to read the Bible just to get more information, but learning to read the Bible relationally as a way to be with our father and to hear his good word for us. And if you're wondering how you can begin to practice his presence so that you can experience fullness of joy, like Jesus promises, these are the means through which we get to do this. We get to come to be with God in prayer and in scripture. And if you feel disconnected right now, if you feel like God is distant from you, he is inviting you to come and be with him. He wants that for you, friends.

We right now are in the middle of a daily Advent reading series, where we're just encouraging people to take one day or one moment of every day to sit and to be with God in his word. And

so, if you're wondering even where to start, let me encourage you to open up one of these daily Advent readings that we put on the app and on the website every day and begin to just sit with God in his word. And hear his good word for you, and be with him.

Which one of these do you think God wants you to pursue so that you can begin to experience the joy that he has for you? Church, God wants to be with you. I know many of us are hurting right now. We feel the darkness. We feel the pain. Many of us are struggling with grief, anxiety, depression right now. And especially in what has been an incredibly hard year. I know many of us are hurting. I just want to say that I, too, feel this darkness. Even now, I still feel this darkness and this pain in many different ways. And yet at the same time, I have experienced God coming to meet my needs and I have experienced him coming to be with me in the midst of the darkness. And this is what Advent is all about. That God is happy to be with you. And in the midst of the pain and the darkness and the suffering, he came to be with us so that we could experience fullness of joy. And may you this week get to go out and experience the joy of knowing that God loves you, and he's happy to be with you so that we can shine brightly in the midst of a world that desperately needs good news.

Let's pray. Father, I know that many of us feel right now, a darkness, a heaviness to life, a weight to life. But thank you that you don't leave us there alone. That you come to be with us. That you're happy to be with us. That you are so excited to be with us. That you love us deeply and you're smiling upon us. Lord, help us to receive your love.

Help us to know that you love us so much, that you would send your only son to come and live a life we can never live, to die a death that we should have died, and then to rise again for us so that one day we could get to be with you forever, for eternity, and join the fullness of joy in your presence. Lord, we long for that. Thank you that this is what we can put our hope in. That it is true because of what Jesus has done for us starting with Advent. Lord, I pray for those that feel discouraged, those that feel disconnected, that you would draw near to them. Help them to know your presence. Help them to know your happiness to be with them. Help them to feel your love today. We ask all of this in your son's name. Amen.

