

**Title: “Finding Joy in our Circumstances”****Text:** (Various) Luke 1:5-17, 25, 41, 44, 46, 47, 57-58, 2:8-20**Main Idea:** Because Christ has come to be God With Us, we can find joy in our circumstances.**Date & Location:** December 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 | Edgewood Baptist Church | Rock Island, IL**Introduction**

It is good to be with you. If we’ve never met, I’m Jason Crosby and I’m part of the leadership team here at Edgewood. In my full-time role, I am the manager of Moody Radio Quad Cities, WDLM; we are a Christian preaching and talk station that you can hear on 89.3 FM or on the Moody Radio app.

During our morning show, we play a game called Mind Bender Trivia. This is where we ask a very random piece of trivia and listeners give us their best guesses for their shot at winning a fabulous prize – like this Moody Radio coffee mug that I will give to the first person who can correctly guess the answer to this question, “According to the 2020 Global Happiness Survey...” Did you know there’s such a thing? I didn’t until Wednesday. There is a Global Happiness Survey. People are being paid to tell us how happy the world is. Anyway, “according to the 2020 Global Happiness Survey, this country is the happiest in the world. Which country is it?” I’ll give you a clue, it is not the United States. Any guesses? China. 93% of survey takers living in China identified as “happy”. By the way, 70% of the United States say they are happy, placing us in eleventh. That number is down 9% from the year before.

Interestingly, global happiness has been trending downward for the past 10-years. Compared to 2011, global happiness is down 14%. According to the data, China is the only country trending upward, seeing a 15% increase in happiness over the last decade.

This morning, we’re going to continue in our Advent series, *Rediscovering Christmas*. Last week, Pastor Dan helped us to find love in our differences and Pastor Brian kicked things off two weeks ago and helped us to find hope in our uncertainties. Today, we’re going to find joy

in our circumstances and we're going to see, because Christ has come to be God With Us, we can experience joy no matter what circumstance we may be going through. Let's pray and then we'll take a deeper dive into our message.

### **I. What is "Joy?"**

To *discover* is to find something or someone unexpectedly or in the course of a search. Rediscovery, then, begins with hope as its foundation because the object of the search was once found and that means it can be found again. Sometimes the best place to begin a search is with a refresher of what the object of the search looks like. So, what, exactly, is *joy*?

By the way, it's ironic to me that we live in a culture that despises firm definitions of anything, choosing instead to let feelings decide what's true and not true and, yet, here we are, using a firm definition to define what is true about a feeling. Do you see the irony too? I digress.

You've probably heard *joy* described in contrast to *happiness*. Sometimes the two get divided along these lines: Happiness is described as fleeting and temporary, while, Joy is deeper and more fulfilling.

Interestingly, the Bible doesn't make any distinction between *joy* and *happiness*. They are essentially different words for the same thing. They may have slightly different nuances, and we would expect that for synonyms, but those nuances are often cultural and shifting. *Joy* and *happiness* have been translated somewhat differently in our different English translations of the Bible, but the original Hebrew and Greek terms used are essentially interchangeable.

So, if we let the Bible inform our definition of *joy*, we'll land on a definition that looks something like this: *Joy* is an emotion of great happiness and pleasure. *Joy* is an emotion of great happiness and pleasure.

### **II. Sometimes the Path to Joy Meanders Through Pain (Luke 1:5-17, 25, 57-58)**

Now, I need you to jump to the beginning of Luke, Luke chapter 1, and I want us to look at one of the first places *joy* appears in the book of Luke. Take a look at Luke chapter 1 and let's begin reading at verse 5, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."

Okay, stop. Right off the bat, we are introduced to some important people. Herod's name helps us establish a timeline and sets the scene. Then, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth. Good people...godly people. Zechariah is a priest and Elizabeth is from the daughters of Aaron which places her in a priestly lineage.

The Bible uses a weighty word to describe both of them. Do you see it? "Righteous." They are, "righteous before God." What does that mean? Let's reread verse 6, "And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." And there we have it. To be righteous before God is to walk blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

Righteousness is the standard. Righteousness is the standard God has for your life and for mine. This is the mark you are measured against. If you want God's approval, the standard is righteousness. Anything below righteous does not meet God's approval. The blessing of God, A-K-A, God's approval, is met with righteousness. Now, why is that important? Let's answer that by looking at our culture for a moment. What does our culture consider to be a blessing? If God approves of you, you have the following: 1) Marriage. 2) Success in your career. 3) Money. 4) Health. 5) Children...but not too many children...too many children might interfere with your goals or your career.

In Zechariah and Elizabeth's day, children were a sign of God's approval. Infertility was considered a disgrace or a punishment. Now, read verse 7, "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years." The pressure and scrutiny from the culture had to have been joy-less. Here you have two people, one a priest, the other from a family of priests, and they don't have the very thing a religious couple with God's approval should have...children. As a matter of fact, Elizabeth's own words later on in chapter 1 indicate that their inability to have kids was not met with compassion or empathy or concern, but rather, it was met with reproach from the people.

Let's continue reading in Luke 1 and pick-up at verse 8,

Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,<sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.<sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.<sup>11</sup> And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.<sup>12</sup> And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.<sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,<sup>15</sup> for he will be great before the Lord.

Did you see that? Joy is coming. We would be crazy to imply that Zechariah and Elizabeth did not have joy in their lives despite being righteous. I don't believe we can paint such a broad stroke. But I do think we can paint a smaller stroke and conclude that in this area of their life, this area of infertility, they did not have joy, they had pain.

Friends, one of the first observations we have to make is that living a righteous life does not mean you will have joy in all things. Pain does not disappear while living a righteous life. There are times in life where the pathway to joy meanders through pain and I chose that word "meander" intentionally. To *meander* is to follow a winding course. We often like a path that has a straight shot with clear visibility but the path of pain is often full of twists, turns, and fog. If

you're on a painful path right now, can I give you one piece of advice? Persevere. Keep praying. Continue assaulting the throne of God in the midst of your pain. God hears you and neither of us knows what God is going to do in your situation. Find hope in what God did in Zechariah and Elizabeth's situation. Where's the hope? Let's find it.

On their best day, Zechariah and Elizabeth couldn't have dreamed up this plan. God had been silent for 400-years. Realistically, who is expecting that this day is going to be the day God speaks? I don't know, but I doubt it's a large number. Now, it just so happens that on this day Zechariah's priestly division is on duty at the temple and a priest has to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. This happened 56 times per day and it wasn't as though the priests were scheduled and Zechariah's name was next on the list. Zechariah was chosen through a lottery system. His whole job is to burn incense and when he gets to the temple of the Lord, the angel Gabriel is standing just to the right of the altar of incense. He can't miss him. And in verse 13, Gabriel delivers God's first message to Israel in over 400-years,

“<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. <sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

I think the joy of Zechariah and Elizabeth is two-fold. Yes, they will have joy that God heard their prayer and answered them with a son. But also remember that Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous. What's the desire of every God-fearing parent? That their children would also follow God and according to Gabriel, that's exactly what John is going to do. But there's more. Remember what Zechariah's job is. He's a priest and the role of the priest is to point people back to God. It's the priests' responsibility to help the people practice

righteousness, to confess sins, to repent, to worship, to be in right-standing with God. What's John going to do? Verse 16, "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,..." John is going to preach repentance. Why? Verse 17, "and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Because the Messiah is coming. They've been waiting 400-years for that message. It finally came.

Listen, Zechariah and Elizabeth just wanted the pain of infertility to go away and to be blessed with a baby. Look at what God did instead: 1) They heard the first message from God in 400-years. 2) God heard their prayer and they're going to have a son. 3) There is a 100% chance that their son is going to follow God. 4) He's going to encourage others to do the same and proclaim a message of repentance. 5) He's going to be a precursor to the Messiah. And Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a front-row seat to all of it. I'm telling you there is no way they come up with that plan on their best day. No way. They had no idea this was the plan waiting for them on the other side of their pain-filled path but God did. And Gabriel was right, joy came. Look at verse 57, "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.<sup>58</sup> And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her."

Friend, I'm not sure what your pain is but I do know this: joy can be found. Getting to it might not be easy. Persevere. Even in the midst of your pain, joy can be found.

### **III. Joy is Found in Recognizing Jesus (Luke 1:41, 44, 46, 47)**

Let's dwell on that and turn it into a question. Where, exactly, is joy found? To get to that answer, I'd like us to move to Luke 1:39, "<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, <sup>40</sup>and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted

Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit..." Jump to verse 44, "<sup>44</sup> For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."

Okay, let's talk about this for a minute. First, notice that Mary enters the room and Elizabeth responds to Mary's greeting, which is perfectly acceptable. If Mary enters the room and Elizabeth blows her off, we'd think there was trouble in the relationship. But John the Baptist, who is just a baby inside of Elizabeth, leaps, not because Mary entered the room but because Jesus did. And, second, oh my goodness, did he leap! Do you remember the story of Jacob and Esau? Genesis 25:22 says of Jacob and Esau, "The children struggled together within her..." This is the same idea here. Don't get confused. John and Jesus weren't having some sort of struggle. The focus here is not on any sort of a struggle but on movement. John the Baptist's leap was so great, so strong, that, frankly, it couldn't have been mistaken for anything else. It was a leap that was full of joy, the more exact sense is that he leaped with delight...picture David leaping with joy as the ark is brought back to Jerusalem. This is the same idea.

But notice, the joy doesn't stop with John the Baptist. The enthusiasm carries over to Elizabeth. Look at verse 42, "and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup> And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Now, notice Mary's response, verse 46, "And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

The joy of John the Baptist, Elizabeth, and Mary is rooted in Jesus. If you lack joy, perhaps the missing ingredient is Jesus. It's an incredible thing to think about, really. This time

of year, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. But why did He have to come and what did He come to do?

Earlier, in the sermon, I mentioned God's standard for all of mankind is righteousness. He expects you to conform to His moral and spiritual standards of right and wrong and to live by those standards, perfectly, all of the time. Well, you know as well as I do the truth of Romans 3:10-12, "None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Now, in our culture, when people don't measure up, we tend to have a compassion that causes us to change the standards. We lower the bar so more people can get in and fewer people are kept out. God doesn't work that way. His standard of righteousness remains the same. His compassionate plan didn't lower the bar. Rather, Christmas is a reminder that He sent His only Son to meet the standard. Jesus lived the sinless life that we could not live, died the death on the cross we should have died, was buried, and rose again making it possible for us to be made right with Him. Salvation is available to us through Christ when we place our faith in Him for the forgiveness of our sins, transferring our sin to Him and His righteousness to us, so that, when God looks at us, He sees the perpetual righteousness of His Son. Friend, if joy is missing in your life, perhaps the missing ingredient is Jesus. If you don't know the joy of salvation, let's take care of that before we part ways today. Your life doesn't have to remain joyless any longer. You can find out firsthand that Joy has a name, it's Jesus. Jesus is the reason the person in pain can still rejoice. Jesus is the reason the person who came out of an addiction has joy. Jesus is the reason we can look at verses like James 1:3 and count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds. Jesus is the reason we can follow Philippians 4:4 and rejoice in the Lord always. The key

to the Christian's joy is its source, the Lord. But if you don't know the Lord, you can't tap into the joy that's found in Christ. You can't know the joy of following Jesus.

#### **IV. Joy is Found in Confession, Repentance, and Forgiveness of Sins**

So, let's state the obvious for a moment. If you are a Christ-follower and you find yourself lacking joy, and it's not out of a chemical imbalance, and it's not out of a pain point in your life, can I ask you a pointed question? Is there a sin issue that needs to be addressed? Here's the obvious statement: One of the fastest ways to kill joy is to sin. Any sin will chip away at your joy, but if your sin is habitual and you harbor the sin rather than repent of it, you are depriving yourself of the joy that is yours in Christ.

The deacons along with Pastor Brian and Pastor Andy have been working through the book, *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund. I highly recommend this book. Let me read to you some of my highlights from chapter 3, *The Happiness of Christ*.

“Christians intuitively know that it pleases Christ when we listen to him and obey him. But what if his very heart and joy is engaged in a new way in our foibles and failures?”

“Christ's own joy, comfort, happiness, and glory are increased and enlarged by his showing grace and mercy, in pardoning, relieving, and comforting his members here on earth.”

“[Christ] does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon with distress and need and emptiness. That's the whole point. It's what He came to heal. He went down into the horror of death and plunged out through the other side in order to provide a limitless supply of mercy and grace to His people.”

“When you come to Christ for mercy and love and help in your anguish and perplexity and sinfulness, you are going with the flow of His own deepest wishes, not against them.

“We tend to think that when we approach Jesus for help in our need and mercy amid our sins, we somehow detract from Him, lessen Him, impoverish Him.”

“Christ’s heart is not drained by our coming to Him; His heart is filled up all the more by our coming to Him.”

“He wants us to draw strength from His love, but the only ones qualified to do that are sinners in need of undeserved love. And He doesn’t just want us to be forgiven. He wants us.”

I am convinced that one of the hardest sin issues for us to wrap our minds around is forgiveness. In my introduction, I mentioned the happiness study. The study not only measures happiness but it also analyzes the reasons people give for their greatest happiness. In 2020, there were 5 reasons that saw significant happiness upticks when compared to 2019. The biggest uptick was, “being forgiven for something I did.” That saw a 5% increase as a reason people gave for their happiness. The second highest, seeing a 4% increase was, “forgiving someone for something they did.” I’m not sure which one is harder: extending forgiveness or receiving forgiveness. I know from my own experience in this area that both can be pretty gut-wrenching. Sometimes, I think it’s easier to hold onto grudges than it is to pursue reconciliation and forgiveness. It certainly isn’t healthier and it almost always leads to more pain and yet, in my mind, I can convince myself that it’s easier. Here’s what I know with certainty: If Jesus Christ can forgive me for the numerous sins I’ve committed against Him and if it’s also true that the power of Christ lives within me, then with His help I can receive and extend forgiveness. I suppose the question is, “Do I want to?” Do you want to?

#### **V. Joy is Found When You Share the Gospel (Luke 2:8-20)**

Let me share with you one more way joy is found. Joy is found when you share the gospel. Turn with me to Luke 2:8-14,

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

So, the shepherds have the message. What did they do next? They proclaimed it. Let’s keep reading in verse 15,

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

While the New Testament holds shepherds in high regard, the first century culture had very little appreciation for them. Shepherds were subject to suspicion and scorn. They were often associated with robbers and their extended absences and poor reputation disqualified them from being legal witnesses. One commentator said, “There is no more despised occupation in the world than that of shepherds.” Yet, that’s the first audience to learn of the birth of Jesus.

The Shepherds responded to the Angel’s message with faith and headed to Bethlehem to see this Jesus. When they arrived, they found Mary, Joseph, and Jesus exactly as the angel described them, lying in a manger. The shepherds then provided a testimony to Mary, Joseph and anyone else around of what they heard from the angel in the field. Their testimony, which wouldn’t be allowed in court, caused those who heard it to “wonder.” That’s a very different response than the response of the shepherds. The shepherds heard the message and responded with faith. Those around the manger (with the exception of Mary) “wondered.” To “wonder” is

to be extraordinarily impressed or disturbed by something. It is to marvel or to be amazed at an event or occurrence. People constantly marveled at Jesus, and still do today, but their marveling, their wonder, never became faith. It simply remained fascination.

Nobody new came to faith in Christ as a result of the evangelism of the shepherds. If the goal of their testimony was new faith professions, this was hardly a success. But that wasn't their goal. They were just being obedient and faithfully followed the message they heard, sharing that message with anyone who would listen. Their obedience and faithful proclamation didn't result in salvations at that moment, but it did result in joy. Why? Because joy is found when you share the gospel.

### **Conclusion**

My wife and I are on a hunt. Several years ago, we had a Christmas party for the WDLM team at our home and Paula Morgan, who is an excellent maker of desserts, brought a dessert. I really enjoyed that dessert. It was delicious. I enjoyed it so much that I told Suzy that we (and by "we" I meant "she") needed to get that recipe. About a week ago, Suzy mentioned wanting to make that delicious dessert. It really was a good dessert. Trouble is, we didn't get the recipe. And, for the life of me, I can't remember what that dessert was called, what it looked like, or what it tasted like. And the Morgan's now live in Florida. I have zero confidence we're going to find this tasty dessert. And as you can tell, I'm heartbroken about it.

We may never find that recipe and we aren't joyful about that. But we CAN find joy when we share the gospel. We can find joy when we confess, repent, and ask forgiveness for sins. We can find joy when we journey on the pathway through pain. And we can find joy when we press into Jesus. Friend, joy has a name...it's Jesus.

Let's pray.