



“Joy FULL”

Epiphany Of Our Lord

Saturday & Sunday, January 4 & 5, 2020
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Grace and peace be to you from our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My wife and I have a marriage problem. She likes watching movies from the Hallmark channel and Lifetime, the ones where there's a prince from a small unnamed European country and he falls in love with the American interior designer who's working on the palace, you know. I like watching dystopian end of the world movies. It can be World War 3 or perhaps a flu pandemic that goes across the world or an EMP strike in the atmosphere where you can't use any of your electronic devices, or I'll even go for the Zombie Apocalypse, that's good too.

I don't really know, why do I like these kinds of movies, why do I seem attracted to these types of movies, I think I've figured it out. I like seeing people going through struggles and still finding hope. Where they're living, they are trying to find a way to live even when the world seems like it's against them. How do you “live” when things go so “bad?”

The book of the prophet Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible by chapters and verses and it's probably one of the most complex. The ministry of the prophet Jeremiah begins just before, during and after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC. God had made a covenant, a commitment to always be present for them, loving and caring for them, but the people at this point had not been responding in kind to God's love and gifts to them. And like all of the prophets before and after Jeremiah he has harsh words for those who are not following God and keeping his law. He wants the people to turn from their idolatrous ways before it's too late. They were being disobedient, they were breaking those covenant commands of honoring and worshiping God, and also caring for neighbor and stranger alike. The warnings come before this dystopian end that involves war, death, destruction and ultimately deportation of a quarter of the population of Israel to Babylon. A captivity that is going to last for 70 years.

But after this, after this destruction and deportation, Jeremiah and his language pivot. He changes his tone from condemnation to consolation, kind of like not hitting someone when they are down. Jeremiah instead offers words of hope. He looks forward to a new day. He proclaims a glorious vision of God saving, gathering, and restoring God's people.

Instead of one of his usual doom and gloom, look how poorly you have been behaving, denunciation, Jeremiah instead offers a sneak-peak into a future that is filled with promise and hope: God will restore Israel, the people will be redeemed, they will be saved, and they will ultimately return to the land that God had first given them. Their mourning, Jeremiah says, will be turned into joy. God will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.

Chapter 31 is a celebration of that return, a homecoming for a people to a place that most of them had never even seen or lived in before.

Jeremiah learns from God that he will write a new and better covenant that will take the place of the old one.

God's Law of loving him and others, will be written into the hearts of the people. A new and better world is coming, and all of it will be God's doing for his people. God will transform their hearts; he will set them free from their sins and from the bondage that they face.

The people will not just know God, they will **know** God.

We will become righteous through God's grace alone. Hearts will be changed, and Joy will reign in our lives.

In the Old Testament, people remember these past saving acts by God by celebrating with communal feasts and celebrations. They remember with joy and festivals God's actions and presence on behalf of his people in the past, but also in the present and anticipation of the future. They celebrated deliverance from bondage and slavery at the hands of foreign powers, and we see that in festivals such as Passover or Hanukkah. It's a time of feasting and celebration, of praying and singing of remembering the mighty acts of God.

C. S. Lewis has said that, "Joy is the serious business of Heaven."

And In the New Testament that serious business is announced by the cry of the angel of the Lord to the shepherds that we heard on Christmas Eve: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all of the people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2;10-11)

Now last week our theme was Pain-full. It was the killing of the innocents in Bethlehem by King Herod. Actually, that's the story that comes right after the gospel that we read today. This week a celebration is joyful, the prelude to that story. The Wise Men in Matthew's gospel have traveled a great distance in harsh environment to pay homage, to worship the Messiah that has been announced by the star and was born in Bethlehem. And those Wise Men upon seeing that final destination, the Bible says they were "overwhelmed by joy." How wonderful it must have been for them to be overwhelmed with joy?

When I was growing up, and I was an early teenager, my parents decided to get a divorce. It was probably one of the most unhappiest times of my life. At the same time, my mother and I began going to church regularly to our local Lutheran church, and it was there that I experienced Christian community of people that loved me and cared for me. Even though it was one of the most unhappiest times of my life, it was also a time where I experienced tremendous joy of being in that community.

There is a difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is what you feel when everything is going great in your life. Joy is different. I realize it is a gift, it's a spring that runs deep in your soul that satisfies you even when the situation of your life is drying you up. As the psalmist says, "Weeping may linger in the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalm 30.5)

That's the teaching of the Sermon of the Mount by Jesus when he talks about those blessed, we are when people revile us or persecute us. And that's the experience of the early church as they went through suffering and persecution.

Joy is not based on what we're feeling at the moment or even the events that knock us down. A life of discipleship is a life of joy because our joy is in knowing Christ, being in relationship with him, experiencing his grace, living in his Spirit.

The appearance of the Messiah offers to us love, grace, forgiveness and salvation for all people and that mood of joy is what we experience when we read the New Testament.

All of scripture leads us to the joy of knowing Jesus Christ who was born in Bethlehem and who is celebrated by wise men and women throughout the ages.

Come, enter into the joy of our Savior! God prepares a feast for us; his holy Spirit offers the gift of joy. May the birth of our Savior give you that joy. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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