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WHY JESUS WANTS YOU TO GO ON SPACE MOUNTAIN

Luke 2:10-11

Mother Teresa said it is a net of love by which you can catch souls. Musician Carlos Santana said if you carry it in your heart you can heal any moment. Philosopher and theologian Pierre de Chardin said it is the infallible sign of the presence of God. That is a profound thought. Where it exists God is present. Writer Ann Voskamp said it is the realest reality and the fullest life. What is this realest reality, this sign of the presence of God? According to all those people, it is joy. Joy is not easy to define, but it is not hard to identify. We know it when we experience it, and we are painfully aware of its absence when we don’t have it. Today we are going to think about joy.

One of the classic Christmas carols is *Joy To The World*. There is another great carol titled *How Great Our Joy*. I saw one lawn Christmas decoration that just said, “Joy.” When have you experienced joy? We had a birthday celebration for my mother last night. Our family, sadly minus Michael who is in Atlanta training to fly a new aircraft, got together to celebrate my mother’s birthday. At one point I watched 5 year old Ella playing with little Wesley. They both had huge grins on their faces and were laughing, and I found myself feeling great joy. When and why do you feel joy? How many occasions in your life would you say are marked by great joy? How many truly joyful people do you know?

While this season is associated with joy, many people instead of singing *How Great Our Joy* are singing “How great our stress.” Covid hasn’t helped. It has taken the fun out of a lot of things and made pretty much everything more difficult, although at least it means we are not going to a mall and being frustrated by absolutely jammed parking lots. But this year we stress over whether an overloaded Amazon is going to get that present here on time. Meanwhile the pandemic is at a terrible peak, and that’s nothing to rejoice about. In the midst of the rush of Christmas, in the middle of a pandemic, does it make any sense to sing about joy? Oh, wait, of course it doesn’t because we’re not supposed to be singing at all. It spreads the virus, you know. Despite all the stress and difficulties we face, joy is inexorably linked with Christmas. We see that in Luke 2:10-11.

GOD WANTS US TO EXPERIENCE JOY

In these verses we see that familiar scene where angels appeared to random shepherds in the fields outside the town of Bethlehem. The first angel announced, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” Isn’t it amazing that out of all the people who have ever lived God chose to send an angel to a group of shepherds? Why did God single out this group to receive this angelic visit? Were they somehow more virtuous, more deserving than most people? No, they were just a bunch of guys, remarkable for nothing. That was part of the point. God wasn’t selecting the elite, the best in show, the creme de la creme of the human race to reward with this good news. He picked some of the unlikeliest people on the planet. The only thing that might have recommended them to God was they happened to be in the right place at the right time. And that’s about it.

This dovetails with what the angel announced. Notice he said the good news he brought would cause joy for “all the people.” Not for worthy people, not for acceptable people, not for important people, not just for Jewish people, not for religious people. This was about joy for anyone and everyone, beginning with some random, unknown and unimportant shepherds.

This was the beginning of God’s grace invasion of human history. This was the greatest act of divine goodness and wisdom that ever has or ever will occur. What would it do? It would bring joy to all people. What does that tell us? It says that God cares about people having joy. He wants us to experience joy. This was not about people having a little bit of joy. The good news would cause *great* joy. The Greek word for great was mega, so this angel said people would have mega joy because of this news.

There are starting to be issues with shortages of toilet paper in stores again. Are you kidding? Man, 2020 just keeps on giving, doesn’t it? So far Laurie and I have been able to get TP, but what we can’t find is our favorite, Charmin ultra soft. It comes in packages that proclaim they have mega rolls of toilet paper. They are huge rolls, which I think is wonderful, because that means fewer occasions of having to do the annoying chore of replacing a now depleted roll in the toilet paper holder. Mega means enormous. When the lottery wants to convince you to give away your money they try to entice you with “mega millions.” Mega means as big as you can imagine, and even bigger. And God’s greatest act of grace in all of history is intended to give you mega joy.

This is what God wants for people. We have all kinds of images of what God is like, but I think people often don’t realize that God wants deeply for people to be filled with mega joy. Laurie and I have been shopping for Christmas, mostly on line of course. After all, it is 2020. Laurie recently expressed a little anxiety because she so much wants to give gifts that will be really fun for our kids and grandkids. She feels that pressure because she so much wants our kids and grandkids to experience joy. That is natural for a parent who loves their children and grandchildren. It helps us understand the true character of God when we see that he wants that kind of joy for us even more than we want it for our kids.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, the late philosopher Dallas Willard said that God is the most joyful being in existence. Joy is an intrinsic part of his character. One characteristic of joy is that people who have it want to spread it and share it. It’s like they can’t help themselves. Joy has a unique aspect to it. This time of year introduces a dilemma for me. Usually during the holidays Laurie will make an apple pie or two for family holiday celebrations. That means I have to share the pie with everyone else. At Thanksgiving this year I got the grand sum of one piece of pie. One stinking piece. When you share a pie with others that necessarily means you get less. But joy is a completely different kind of pie. When you share joy with others, you get more joy. That would be like getting even more pie when you share it with others. It’s kind of amazing. The point is that God is full of joy, but loves sharing his joy with people because then he gets even more joy.

In John 15:11 after instructing his disciples about remaining in him, Jesus said, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Jesus said he wanted his joy to be in his followers. How appealing to them would that be if he was as joyful as, say, an undertaker who is suffering from a bad case of hemorrhoids? That’s how some people seem to think Jesus was. Yeah, that Jesus is as much fun as a colonoscopy. If that was true, what Jesus said in John 15:11 makes no sense at all. It only makes sense if having the kind of joy Jesus had was something anyone and everyone would want. Jesus went on to say, “that your joy may be complete.” Having his joy would mean that they would have total joy. Having his joy meant they would have as much joy as it is possible for a person to have. That is what Jesus had, and it is what he wants for you and me.

Psalm 66:1 commands, “Shout for joy to God, all the earth.” How often have you been so filled with joy that you shouted? Most of us are not so demonstrative that we shout for joy, but that is what God wants for us. About the only time we typically might shout for joy is at a sports event. There is a video that we no longer have because it was on VHS tape, but I wish we still had it. I mentioned last week a football game when the Oregon State football team, coached by a good friend of ours, pulled off a huge upset win over USC. Laurie and I stood on the sidelines to watch that game. We got this clip from the TV broadcast of the game. We happened to be standing on the sideline at the goal line when Oregon State scored a touchdown right in front of us. On the broadcast you could see Laurie jumping up and down for joy. That’s the kind of joy that God wants us to have.

Romans 14:17 says that the kingdom of God is joy in the Holy Spirit. It is not solemn religious dullness. It is joy. The angels on that night so long ago came to announce that the arrival of the baby that was born in that stable in Bethlehem was intended to bring joy. C. S. Lewis said joy is the serious business of heaven. Do you hear that? Do you believe it?

Professor and author, Tony Campolo, told a story about being at Disney World with his family. They had spent a day in the Magic Kingdom and were at the end of that long day. But his son pleaded to go on the Space Mountain ride one more time. They were tired and ready to be done, but his son kept pushing. The parents were not yielding, so his son trotted out the big gun. He said, “Jesus wants me to go on Space Mountain again.” How do you say no if Jesus wants him to do it? You don’t want your child to disobey Jesus, do you? Campolo, obviously skeptical, said, “What makes you think Jesus wants you to go on Space Mountain?” His son said, “Don’t you say that Jesus really loves us, that he knows everything about us?” “Yes, that’s true.” “And don’t you say that he identifies with us and feels everything we feel?” “Yes.” “Well, I feel great joy when I ride on Space Mountain. He feels my joy, and he really likes it, and he wants to feel that joy again.” He got to go on the ride. He demonstrated that he understood the message of the angels. God wants us to have joy. Jesus came into this world so that we would have joy.

JOY IS NOT EXACTLY THE SAME AS HAPPINESS

Some people use joy and happiness interchangeably. They are closely related. In fact, in many ways they are the same, but there is one difference between them that I will identify shortly. We should distinguish between them because when we say God wants us to have joy it is common for that to be understood to mean, “God wants me to be happy.” Technically, that’s true. But that statement often means to people, “Since God wants me to be happy he will let me do what I want, because I know what will make me happy and could never be happy if I can’t do it.”

I have encountered this on a number of occasions throughout my years of ministry. A common cause of this is a person who is determined to leave their spouse for another person or continue an affair. The usual rationale is “I love this other person and could not be happy without them, and I know God wants me to be happy. So I know this is what God wants.”

We tend to think we know what is best for us and what will make us happy. But that is a dubious assertion. If we are even reasonably honest with ourselves we can think of numerous occasions when we were certain we knew what would make us happy, set our sights to gain that thing, obtained it, and found out it didn’t make us happy at all. Any parent knows the fallacy of this thinking. The child insists that she wants, no, not wants, must have cookies for dinner. To be denied that obvious necessity would be a tragedy on the level of a cataclysmic natural disaster, and would provoke a commensurately dramatic and heart-rending emotional meltdown. Most of us grow up and get better about that, but we never are totally free of it. That approach to life sets us up not for joy, but for disappointment and frustration. Our “happiness” will not last, and it will leave us disappointed.

A second problem with the happiness idea is that it makes happiness dependent on circumstances. We are happy because we have some happy things occurring in our lives. Of course, the obvious problem with this is it dooms us to an inconsistent joy. Our circumstances are not going to be consistently happy. That’s not how life is. If joy is dependent on circumstances, then our joy will also necessarily be inconsistent. In fact, it will doom us to unhappiness, because even when circumstances are happy, looming out there will be the threat of the happy times ending. The fear of the happy times ending will limit or even demolish happiness.

In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner wrote, “Happiness comes along when things are going our way, which makes it only a forerunner to the unhappiness that inevitably follows when things stop going our way, as in the end they will stop for all of us.” That is so true. Recently Laurie and I got to have a 3 day mini-vacation out in the desert. This has been a difficult year for all of us. It has been quite demanding for Laurie and me for several reasons, and we hadn’t had a break in a year. So 3 days just to get away and relax was big blessing. The weather was wonderful, and we got a great deal at the La Quinta Resort, which is a great place. One morning we decided we would go out on the patio outside our room and have breakfast. We had stocked some groceries for just this purpose the night before. This meant transporting paper bowls of cereal, yogurt, plastic utensils, napkins, fruit, a pastry, juice and coffee for Laurie out to the patio. We were happy. We were relaxing in a beautiful place. We’d had a wonderful dinner out the night before and had slept long and well, waking up when we felt like it. We were just about ready to eat, but I had a couple more items to bring out to the patio. When I came out, just as I was setting the items down, Laurie urgently said, “Rick, don’t let the door close.” Too late. I hadn’t paid attention and the door had slammed shut. Laurie asked, “Rick, do you have the room key on you?” “Uh, no.” “Great. You’ve just locked us out of our room.” I immediately tested this assertion by trying to open the door. She was right. We were locked out. Just to clarify, when Laurie informed me that I had locked us out of the room she did not say it cheerfully. She was not happy. I had created an inconvenient situation for us, and even worse, her morning cup of hot coffee was in the room. I had separated her from her morning fix of caffeine. Any of you who live with a caffeine addict will understand this is bad juju. The good feeling, the pleasant, relaxed happiness, evaporated in an instant for both of us. I knew Laurie was not happy with me and was frustrated. This was not a marital crisis. I was also not happy with me and was frustrated. Our relaxed happiness was suddenly totally absent. This incident reminds us that happiness derived from good circumstances is an ephemeral thing that can vanish in an instant. I don’t want to leave you hanging. Our mini vacation wasn’t ruined. Laurie said, “You wouldn’t happen to have your cell phone on you, would you?” She assumed reasonably that if I didn’t have the foresight to have a room key it was unlikely I’d have my phone. But hallelujah, I did have it on me. I called the hotel, got the front desk and explained our situation. Within 5 minutes a hotel security person came and unlocked our door. He was very cheerful, and both he and the front desk person said I shouldn’t feel bad about it because it happens all the time. I was happy that the hotel people didn’t want me to feel like an idiot, even though I am one. But Laurie got her coffee and happiness returned.

It is fine to be happy when happy circumstances occur. That is to be expected. We should joyfully give thanks to God when we experience blessings and joyful events. However, what would be great is if we could have joy all the time. In fact, that is what God both wants for us and even commands us. Romans 12:12 tells us to “be joyful in hope.” Not just some of the time, but all of the time. Philippians 4:4 tells us to “rejoice in the Lord always.” Not sometimes. Not most of the time. Always. The exact same command shows up in 1 Thessalonians 5:16. The New Living Translation of that verse is “always be joyful.” That’s what God wants for us, which means the joy he wants for us absolutely cannot be based on our circumstances. The only way that would be possible is if he always gave us happy circumstances, and that just doesn’t happen.

There is one small, but very important difference between happiness and joy. Both of them are responses. We are joyful and we are happy when something good happens to us. They are the natural human response to something wonderful. The difference is, joy as God commands it, is a response to a good thing that never changes and never ends. Happiness is only temporary because happy circumstances are never unending. But joy is permanent because it is provoked by a happy circumstance that will never stop.

Think again about the shepherds hearing the news of great joy from the angels. The event that was the cause of great joy was the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Was that event going to change the circumstances of those shepherds’ lives? Were they going to have more money, get better homes, suddenly become famous and powerful, be a lot healthier than they had been? No, none of that was going to happen. Their lives weren’t going to be different in any way. Well what was the joy about then? God was doing something for them that would transcend all the circumstances of their lives. In the person of Jesus he had entered the world to give them the hope of being accepted in God’s kingdom, forgiven and loved by him, to live eternally. Those were gifts immeasurably greater than anything on this earth. The joy the angels announced was a response to those gifts. It will never go away, because those gifts never go away.

The joy the angels spoke of was a joy that can exist in the middle of the hardships and disappointments of this world. It is not pretending that we are not sad when sad things happen. It is not denying our discouragement or our grief when disappointments and losses occur. It is feeling those emotions, acknowledging them, but at the same time remembering that there is an even greater joy and being thankful for it. It is when we hang onto that joy that the joy of the Lord becomes our strength. It enables us to stand firm, to give thanks to God, to have hope even in the middle of hardship, discouragement, loss and pain.

There are a few moments that I recall from my life that were brief but poignant and lasting lessons from God. One of those happened in a small way 23 years ago. It was 1997, and it was a very sad, difficult year for our family. That year my dad died after a bout with cancer. He died at the end of July. A couple of months later we began thinking about what it was going to be like to go through the holidays with the sadness of Dad’s passing. Especially we envisioned what the first big one, Thanksgiving, would be like. We thought it would be dreadful to go through our usual joyful traditions, but without Dad. Rather than helping us give thanks, we feared it was just going to be sad. We had to do something different. We had to go someplace different. We came up with the idea of going to Hawaii for Thanksgiving. That would be different, would shift the focus, and maybe make it more fun. So we planned a trip for the whole family to Hawaii. As it turned out, Jerry’s back blew up, so he wasn’t able to go, but the rest of us went. Carissa was 15 and Toby was 12, and they were ecstatic to be going to Hawaii. They’d never been there, but they’d heard much about it and they were excited. A few days before our flight Carissa came down with a cold. So the day we flew she was feeling miserable. I felt so bad for her. She got settled in her seat. I was just getting ready to buckle in, but first I wanted to check on her. I went to her seat and asked, “How are you doing Carissa?” She said, “I feel terrible.” I said, “I’m really sorry, Carissa.” She said, “It’s okay, Dad, because we’re going to Hawaii!” She had a bad thing, an unhappy circumstance, but she also had something bigger and better in her life, and so she had joy despite feeling lousy.

We are all going to go through losses, hardships, stressful times, discouraging times, sorrowful times. And we will feel the weight of those. But we have something great. We have God with us, and all the hope and love he brings, and that never fades, never ends, never changes. We rejoice in who God is and what he has given us, and in the midst of all the trials the joy of the Lord becomes our strength.

APPLICATION

How do we experience joy through the ups and downs of life?

GO GOD’S WAY

In Psalm 51 David confronted and admitted his disobedience to God. He said in verse 4, “Against you, and you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” But he asked God in verse 9 to “blot out all my iniquity.” Then he said in verse 12, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” That joy had to be restored because his disobedience to God had obliterated it. Here’s a news flash. When you feel guilty you won’t feel joy.

One of the most important ways we can foster and nurture the joy of the Lord is by doing what God commands us to do. Simply obey him. Psalm 19:8 says, “The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.” It brings joy to us when we live by God’s precepts, by his instruction.

God is the source of joy. He is where all joy comes from. If we separate ourselves from him, if we run from him, what do you think is going to happen? We are distancing ourselves from joy. If we want joy, what we must do is run toward him and embrace him. The more we run toward him the more joy we can experience. Psalm 16:11 says to God, “You make known to me the path of life: you will fill me with joy in your presence.” If you want to be filled with joy, live in God’s presence.

Envision a light bulb. That bulb was created and manufactured to give off light. It is wired to do so. It has all the necessary components to do that. But if it is not screwed into a socket in a lamp and connected to power, it will never shed a tiny bit of light. You and I were created and wired to give off joy. But unless we are connected to the source of joy, we will not give off any joy, nor will we experience it. So stay connected to God.

REJOICE IN HOPE

Much like we saw last week with hope, we need to focus our attention on the great gifts God has given us. Remember that it is having something greater than our circumstances that enables us to have hope and joy no matter what our situation might be. The more we dwell on the good that God has done for us, good that will never fade, the more we can experience joy.

One of the most important things we can do is continually praise and thank God for his goodness to us. As we do that we are reminded of the blessings that God has given us, and our hearts are filled with joy.

SERVE PEOPLE IN LOVE

Remember that curious aspect of joy, that in sharing it we get more of it. Joy is contagious. The more we spread our joy by loving other people the more joy we will have. I experience the contagious nature of joy because I live with Laurie, who brings joy pretty much everywhere she goes. One night recently we were getting ready for bed. I was on the other side of the room. I was mystified when seemingly out of the blue she said, “It’s so nice to have cream cheese on Saturday night.” I could make no sense of that statement. Where did it come from? We hadn’t had cream cheese. At least not that I could recall. And even if we did, why would having cream cheese be important? Completely lost I said, “What are you talking about? Why do you think it’s nice to have cream cheese?” Immediately she started laughing. I’m talking life threatening laughing because she was laughing so hard she couldn’t even breathe. She couldn’t stop. Finally, she managed to stop for just a moment, long enough to gasp out, “I didn’t say ‘cream cheese,’ I said, ‘clean sheets.’” Which launched her immediately into another spasm of uncontrollable laughter. Do you know what happens when you are around someone laughing that hard and that long? Here’s what happens to me, the next thing I know I am laughing so hard I can’t breathe either. When it finally subsided a bit, I said, “Man, is that an old person thing, or what? It’s like that conversation where the old woman says to her ancient husband, “Are you thirsty?” And he says, “It’s not Thursday.” And the fits of laughter started all over again. Ever since then, all I have to do is say, “cream cheese” and Laurie bursts into laughter.

Her joy is contagious. Joy is a communicable condition, and you catch it in the context of relationships. Numerous studies over many years have determined that lasting joy is not linked to any particular set of circumstances. Money, success, status, age, gender, ethnicity, even physical health, do not have any significant correlation to joy. What joy *is* linked to is relationships. A research team from UCLA concluded, “Joy springs from connection and communion between the joyous person and another person.”

Think about what people usually consider their most joyful experiences. A marriage, the birth of a child, a party, a reunion. All of these involve people. I’ll take it one step further. It is not just having relationships, it is loving and serving people that most contributes to joy. A pastor named Chuck Sackett says if you want genuine joy, “stop thinking...about happiness, and think about service.”

To the degree that you think about yourself and serve yourself, you will lessen joy. You will increase joy by thinking about and serving God, first, and others next.

CHOOSE JOY

Philippians 4:4 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16 both command us to rejoice, to be joyful. The Psalms frequently tell us to shout for joy. What should we deduce from that? The fact that we are commanded to be joyful and rejoice necessarily means we have a choice. We can choose to be joyful or not. There is a part of this that is up to us.

Remember what the researchers on joy have learned. Joy is not primarily circumstantial. In other words, if you are not joyful today, you will not be more joyful when you get better circumstances. Let’s try a little thought experiment. Imagine a person who has lived in an impoverished third world slum. This person lived in a 10 foot by 10 foot shack with 7 other family members. A leaky, tin roof over their heads, no running water or electricity. Raw sewage runs down the street. Disease is rampant. Food is scarce and they are always hungry. War lords and their gangs threaten residents, bully them and often kill them for no reason. Suppose this person and their family somehow is taken out of that situation and brought to the United States where they now live in two separate 800 square foot apartments. They are in a poor part of town, but there is no open sewage in the street, they are safe, there is food to eat, they have clean, running water and electricity. That person rejoices in their good fortune and this wonderful new situation. Now imagine another person who lived in a 7000 square foot mansion in Rancho Santa Fe. This person now has lost their fortune and must live in an 800 square foot apartment in the same apartment building as our first subject. How does that person feel about it? That individual is depressed, hates where they are living. The situation is the same. The only thing different is how the person views it.

In 2 Corinthians 8:2 Paul described the Christians in Macedonia. He wrote, “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” Their circumstances were inconceivably bad. They were in a severe trial, persecuted and had extreme poverty. And in that awful condition they had such overflowing joy it made them explode with generosity, even though they had nothing. Their joy did not come from their circumstances. They had great joy because of what God had done for them, and so they choose to be joyful. We can choose that as well.

Joy is sometimes hard to define. But I believe it is a sense of well being, of contentment and peace, and gladness that one is greatly blessed. We have that not because of our circumstances, but because of God’s love and grace. Joy is something inside of us. It does not reside outside us.

In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner wrote, “The world is full of darkness, but…at the heart of darkness, whoever would have believed it, there is joy unimaginable…God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy…We have God’s joy in our blood.”