

Advent: Joy

Luke 3:7–18

On this third Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of Joy. This season often brings a mix of feelings: excitement from Christmas music and decorations, a sense of community from gathering with family and friends, and perhaps even moments of loneliness or stress. Each of us carries our own memories and emotions tied to this time of year. Today, let's explore the biblical meaning of joy, its sources, and how we can cultivate joy in our lives, especially as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus.

Understanding Joy

In Scripture, joy is expressed in various forms. We see joy in the beauty of God's creation, in family gatherings, in friendship, and community when we are happy, safe and secure. But we also recognize that life isn't always joyous. There are times of suffering, loss, and sorrow. Yet, even in these difficult moments, people of faith find reasons to rejoice.

Take the Israelites, for example. While suffering in slavery in Egypt, they cried out to God for deliverance. When God raised up Moses, their first response was to sing for joy, even as they wandered in the wilderness, far from the promised land. Their redemption was not immediate, but they rejoiced in anticipation of what was to come.

When Jesus was born, it was announced as good news that brought great joy. Jesus Himself taught us about joy, saying, "When people reject you or persecute you for following me, rejoice and be very glad, because your reward is great in heaven." The early Christian communities thrived on this joy, even amidst persecution and hardship.

The Apostle Paul, while imprisoned, spoke of the joy of faith. He acknowledged his sorrow but chose to rejoice, believing that joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit—a sign of Jesus' presence in our lives, even in our darkest moments.

Biblical Defining Joy

So what is joy? It is important to distinguish joy from happiness. Joy is not merely a fleeting feeling; it is deeper and more profound. Joy can exist alongside pain and sorrow. It is rooted in hope, peace, and love, grounded in the assurance that God is with us. Joy is an attitude we adopt, not because of favorable circumstances, but because of our faith in God's promises.

Exploring the Text

Today's passage from Luke reveals a crowd that has come out to John the Baptist in the wilderness. The wilderness is often a place of encounter with God, especially during challenging times. Perhaps these people felt lost and were seeking joy. They longed for change but weren't sure how to achieve it.

John's message was one of repentance, which may not have been what they wanted to hear but was what they needed. The Greek word for repentance, "*metanoia*," means change—a turning away from the wrong path toward the right one. This repentance suggests us that it is not enough simply to say sorry. John challenged each

group to reflect on their lives and make necessary changes, urging them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. We all have our own situation that needs to be turned and to be changed. Maybe some people need to let go of the painful experience in the past and maybe some people need to forgive someone who hurt you. Maybe some people need to change their diet or their lifestyle or their mindset. Whatever it is, the important thing is that we cannot make it happen with only our own efforts. What we need is not just willpower, we need God's power!

The Role of the Holy Spirit

John baptized with water, a symbol of cleansing, but pointed to one who would come after him—the Messiah—who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live transformed lives. It is through this connection to God's Spirit that we find the strength to face our challenges and experience true joy.

There is the comparison between baptism with water and baptism with Spirit. *Baptism with water* represents cleansing and the washing away of our sins. *Baptism with Spirit* means that the Holy Spirit is the actual agent of cleansing and empowerment. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives to empower and direct us (Rom. 8:9-11). The Holy Spirit is the basis of our life in Christ and our connection to God.

Many mistakenly believe that happiness comes from eliminating problems, but we know that problems will always exist. However, when we are connected to God's Spirit, we can find joy even in the midst of trials. **Joy is not the absence of suffering but the presence of God in our lives.**

Reflection

I would have to have minor surgery in a few weeks. Praying about it the next morning, right before I was planning to write about joy, I realized that I wasn't feeling especially upbeat. But gradually, as I prayed, I realized that God would be with me all through this small malady and that God would give me the strength and intelligence to deal with it, to figure it out and to live with it, as God had done in the past in similar circumstances. That put me in touch with not only peace but joy. I can't say that I was happy. Or that I wouldn't have wished for different news, but I still, nonetheless, felt joy. This may be part of what it means to rejoice "in all circumstances."

I believe many of you have experienced joy in moments of sorrow or hardship. You have felt the Holy Spirit's connection, offering peace and strength in challenging times.

As we navigate the season of Advent, I encourage you to seek joy in the presence of God. The world may distract, confuse, and frustrate us, but when we focus on God, we can discover joy that transcends our circumstances. Christian joy is a profound decision of faith in Jesus' love and power. It is this joy that sustains us, even in difficult times. Let us find joy as we await the coming of Jesus, who brings hope, peace, and love into our lives.

Prayer

Lord God, we open our hearts to you, seeking your healing and transforming love. We are anxious over many things and look forward to your coming among us. We are blessed in so many ways longing for the complete joy of your kingdom. Our hearts are heavy and seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. Empower our hearts and spirits, O Lord, to be strong witnesses of your presence in our lives. Amen.

