

December 17th, 2017

Scripture:

Psalm 126

Isaiah 61:1-11

Isaiah 55:10-13

“Joy”

Similar to peace ---- or Shalom ---- where everything as God intends it to be ----- joy --- is rather elusive.

This side of the grave we have moments and experiences of joy --- but for the most part they are fleeting and passing --- lasting far shorter than we wish they would.

Amidst the beautiful pockets of joy that God provides us with ----- life in this fallen world ---- returns to its usual just lightly off kilter ways very quickly.

And because of this --- the short lived ---- elusive nature of true joy ----- we never truly get to experience the depths of the kind of joy that God has in store for us.

But thankfully God blesses us with people like Isaiah.

Amid the struggles of life of faith in this world --- amidst the forever longing for more of the beautiful joy we experience from time to time ---- we have people like Isaiah who speak words of encouragement and paint pictures of what joy and encouragement look like ---- a future full of God's blessings.

Isaiah is the pre-eminent theologian of Advent.

And Isaiah is the pre-eminent theologian of Advent precisely because He so often points to the coming of Christ in all His glory ---- at the end of time as we know it.

And Isaiah's prophecy is saturated with images of beauty and restoration ----
- and fulfillment.

Indeed today in Isaiah 61 and 55 we have these grand portraits of just how beautiful ---- good --- and true --- just how joyful it is when God acts and comforts and restores and brings freedom and restoration.

Indeed these images in all of their beauty and grandeur are part of what we can expect when Christ returns and brings with Him the comfort and restoration and freedom that Isaiah speaks of.

If we stop and look at verses like Isaiah chapter 55 verse 12 --- it's hard to imagine a more dramatic and expressive --- all encompassing description of pure joy ----

“You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills
will burst forth into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.”

The mountains and hills will sing --- and the trees will clap their hands.

It's totally in line with what Jesus said when He said ---- “the stones will shout out.”

The mountains and hills will sing ---- the trees will clap their hands --- and the stones will shout out.

The whole of creation will respond in joy when God acts in Christ again.

It will be so grand and so beautiful and so all encompassing we can only ever approximate exactly what it will all look like --- and sound like --- and feel like --- and be.

What we do know is that it will be joyful and then some.

And it will be a joy that is everlasting and complete.

Not the passing --- short lived --- partial --- slipping out of our grasp kind of joy that we experience from time to time now.

As beautiful and powerful and restorative as it can be ----- the joy we experience now is only ever but a glimpse of all this is to come.

And there are always moments when we think that life is actually pretty good ---- and feel as though joy is already mostly here ----- and because of where we live in the world it's almost understandable how we can think this way.

But as long as people go to bed hungry ---- as long as people are oppressed - ----- as long as there is greed ----- we know that the joy we experience cannot last.

When Isaiah talks about proclaiming good news to the poor ----- binding up the brokenhearted ---- proclaiming freedom to captives and release to prisoners --- he isn't just speaking figuratively.

As long as there are oppressive regimes and relationships.

As long as people battle addiction --- and depression --- cancer ---- MS.

As long as human beings use other human beings for their own pleasure.

As long as there is the need for the use of force.

Simply put --- as long as there is suffering.

We know the joy we experience will only ever be but passing because the reality is there are still so many others who suffer.

True joy is not of this world and it is a blessing from God.

Until Christ comes we are all captive ---- we are all limited --- we are all held back --- and shackled in some way.

Until Christ comes again sin slips its way into our lives the world --- every human heart --- over and over and over again.

Only Christ can free us from all that hinders us --- only Christ can set us free into that true state of joy that God desires for us.

And until He comes again --- we only see in part ---- and until He comes we only experience joy in part --- in passing ---- fleeting --- never quite cutting to the core kind of experiences.

Joy is not about pockets of bliss --- that's hedonism.

If our joy only ever comes from experiences of this world ---- we're doomed --- because we can never satisfy that kind of lust for joy.

Joy must come from our trust and faith and belief that these things --- experiences of this world will never truly give us the joy we long for ---- and that only God can.

Our joy often ends when we are drawn back into the mundane ---- less than ideal nature of life this side of the grave.

When Jesus said ---- "you will always have the poor among you" --- part of what He meant was in justice an inequality will always be real in this world.

It isn't until He comes again that the gross inequality and the gross injustice of this world will ever be truly gone.

And that is precisely why we will not ever know true joy until His return.

Unfortunately we too often want to look over the things that really don't lead us to experiences of joy.

Who really wants to focus on hunger and injustice and oppression --- they're downers ---- they don't lead us into joy.

But in actuality they kind of do.

And they lead us into joy because they remind us that God isn't finished yet.

They remind us that God isn't done yet because we know that He will fix all of these things and eradicate all of these things born out of His great love for us.

As Isaiah rightly reminds us ----- God is acutely aware of these things --- and He comes precisely because of these things.

As long as we see injustice --- as long as we see hunger – and oppression --- suffering ---- we know that God isn't finished yet.

Our joy comes not only in feeding ourselves when we are hungry – but in seeing everyone fed when they are hungry --- and as much as we can help solve this ----- only God can truly put an end to it.

If we still think humanity can save the problems of humanity ----- we've missed the point.

We can't do it --- only God can.

That's what salvation is --- that's what Christ coming is all about ---- God not forgetting us --- God rescuing us --- God saving us precisely because we cannot do it ourselves.

The baby in the manger.

The little boy of Bethlehem --- Jesus of Nazareth is the great reverser of fortunes.

That little boy in the manger reminds us that God in Christ will one day once again suddenly burst out of the jungles and shackles that surround and hinder us ---- and He will chase away Satan and all of his allies ----- and rescue and free us --- once and for all --- and for eternity.

That's' the true ---- and lasting and eternal and saving joy that we have to look forward to --- not the next little hedonistic experience of pleasure and delight.

All the foolishness --- pride --- envy --- and greed ----- sickness and suffering ----- that snaps the joy out from between the fingertips of our hearts --- will finally be eliminated and fade way into the sunset like a misty fog.

The one who knows suffering far more than we ever will.

The one who suffered pain far greater than we ever will.

The one who was betrayed and embarrassed and mocked and beaten far worse than we ever will be ----- is coming to free us from all of these things.

That's our joy.

Knowing that we will be freed ----- we will be reconciled --- we will be redeemed --- we will be saved and restored to right ---- perfect --- and everlasting relationship with God ----- that is our joy.

In the mean time we have to settle for a good cup of coffee --- or a great meal ---- a restorative rest ---- the embrace of a loved one ----- and all the other small joys of life ---- that help us carry on --- and in their own way help us into see into that greater joy God has in store for us.

Unfortunately too often we chase the next glimpse of joy instead of looking out onto the joyous horizon and keeping it as our focus.

Eating the very best meal as our source of joy --- only ever leads to needing another very best meal.

Drinking the very best bottle of wine --- the oldest Scotch --- the best of the best ----- only ever leads to yearning for the next best of the best.

Owning the car you've always dreamed of owning --- only ever leads to wanting the next best one after that.

None of these things point to the horizon of joy that is Jesus Christ.
Think of what would bring you joy in this life.

Winning 500 billion dollars.

Your team winning the Stanley Cup 25 years in a row --- or the World Series ---- or the Grey Cup --- or the Superbowl or whatever ----- 25 years in a row.

A dead loved one coming back to life ---- and you getting to spend more time with them.

No more aches in your knee ----- or your shoulder --- no more aches and pain.

Think of that which you probably spend way too much time thinking about. You know what they are for you.

All of these things --- every single last one them --- all of them pale in comparison to the joy that we will have when we come face to face with Christ when He returns.

That's the joy we await --- that's the paradise we await.

Unfortunately when life is good ---- redemption doesn't sound all that appealing.

When everything is going our way ----- joy doesn't occupy our hearts and minds so much --- we feel like we already have it --- life's good --- all is well --- I'm doing just fine.

When we have good health.

When we're surrounded by our loved ones.

When the mortgage payments are manageable.

When the investments are paying off just fine.

When all is well it is increasingly hard for us to truly understand joy --- because we feel as though we've already got a bit of a taste for it.

But in truth ----- our experience of joy is only ever partial.

God's eternal glory ---- true Christian joy --- lasting ---- eternal ---- forever joy is beyond imagination.

In the meantime wait.

We watch.

We witness.

We submit ---- we are obedient --- and we live in dependency on God and His goodness.

The joy the Israelites experienced in Exodus and in Exile had nothing to do with their current conditions or circumstances.

The Exodus ----- was 40 years of wandering about.

The Exile --- was 70 years of being kicked out of their homes and banishment.

The joy they had came from God --- and the promise of return and freedom - ---- not present conditions or circumstances.

True joy --- rapture ----- isn't something we experience this side of the grave for any length of time.

And if anyone claims to live in joy all of the time they are simply self centered because as Isaiah points ---- as long as there are the poor --- as long as there are the brokenhearted --- as long as there are people captive to things in this world ----- we are to have concern for them and we are to reach out to them ---- provide for them and comfort them.

As long as we see another in need of Christ --- we can hardly go about saying it's all just joy joy joy.

Isaiah painted a beautiful picture of joy in the face of calamity because of His great trust in God.

Our joy is born out of our trust --- our faith in what is to come --- thanks to God.

If you look at our Joy sign outside ---- you see that it is grounded by what ---
---- Christ in the middle.

Specifically the baby in the manger.

That was some kind of joy for sure --- the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem.

Merry Christmas for sure.

But the real joy ----- is yet to come ----- the full grown man Jesus coming.

His arrival as a baby started something that will only ever come to its
conclusion at His arrival as a full grown man.

Awaiting His arrival then ----- fully grown ---- post Bethlehem --- post
resurrection ----- that is our greatest joy.

That is the day joy will take on a whole new meaning.

Until then we wait --- and we witness --- we anticipate --- and we keep our
eyes focused on the big picture of salvation ----- God's goodness and God's
joy ----- and not ourselves and what we want or how we feel.

Christ is coming --- joy is coming.

Amen.