

True Joy | Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46-55 | LUMC | Dec 11, 2022

Dear Church family and Friends: We are now in the third week of Advent. In the first week Jesus reminded us to get prepared by repenting. In the second week Isaiah informed us Christ came to bring peace to our lives and the entire world. Jesus Christ equips us to labor for our own peace as well as global peace. The third candle reminds the people of peace to truly live joyfully now and anticipate the fuller joy in Jesus' reign. Indeed, it is a joy beyond human understanding.

Some people describe joy as, "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires". However, biblical joy is not just feelings of pleasure arising from a happy circumstance like the birth of a child, marriage, or a successful event. Joy is a state of one's mind and an absolute orientation of one's soul toward God. This intentional, conscious decision evokes confidence, contentment, and hope. This joy is a deep abiding one that is sustained by the Holy Spirit through scriptural teaching. It is the joy that began at Christ's birth and continues today. Joy filled Christians vibrantly express their love of God in words and deeds, and hate evil with great intensity.

The people of Isaiah's time¹ did not know peace nor the joy we speak of. They were under Assyrian rule, and though Judah was not fully conquered, they remained a puppet nation, paying heavy taxes to the Assyrians. During these hard years, God raised up Isaiah to remind people of their evils, like corruption, violence, and injustice, so they would repent and ask God to forgive them.

God was willing to provide these repented people with a future peace and joy that would flow like a river in their hearts. Isaiah devoted all his time to preaching God's holiness and explaining God's power over the whole earth. Isaiah exhorted the ancient people and us that God is willing to forgive those who repent. Isaiah's preaching is true—the whole earth needs God's blessings, the whole earth is under God, and those who believe God's holiness and power will have inner peace, express joy, and rejoice righteously.

Isaiah warned the ancient people—and so too ourselves—not to adore idols. We must acknowledge that idols have no power to save nor forgive sins. Only God can do that. We have many Idols in our time. They may include money, power, color of skin, status, pride, ego, and misuse use of our wisdom. Isaiah reminds us the God is the creator of the earth, and with the coming of Christ, God will rule people with fairness. Isaiah prophesied the coming of Christ in the world to make believers experience peace and live joyfully. In the reign of Christ believers will be free of sin and suffering, resulting in the enjoyment of God's glory and majesty.

Before Jesus was born, his mother sang a praise song resembling Hannah's song of praise to God. These two songs continue to reverberate in the air. Samuel's mother Hannah's song may have influenced Mary. Hannah was full of Joy and thanksgiving to God for taking away her reproach because she was barren. She bore shame

¹ Isaiah lived in the 8th century BCE and prophesied for 40 years in the reign of 4 kings of Judah.

and was deeply scorned by Peninnah, her co-wife, for having no child. For a long time, she poured out her prayers to God. She was finally overjoyed when God answered her prayers for a child.

Mary, mother of Jesus also sang a song of joyful praise for many reasons: she was well aware that society of her time did not honor a childless woman. Women were regarded much like a garden that either produces a bountiful harvest or is condemned as useless and barren. Having conceived her own child, she was so joyful and full of praises to God. The villagers assumed that she conceived out of wedlock. As a result, she was indirectly being condemned, and could have gone into hiding to avoid public scorn or even stoning to death. She stayed with her relative, Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist for three months. Perhaps when they went to Jerusalem to register for the census, they followed lonely roads, arriving late in the evening to avoid anyone recognizing them. Mary simply may have lived a secretive life until Jesus was born.

Despite her fears, Mary's song revealed the depth of her faith in God. She affirmed Jesus not only as her son but as her savior who would forgive her sins. She also announced that the world would respect her for carrying baby Jesus to term. She knew she would be honored, called "blessed" for accepting public rebuke, and overcoming the fear of death to accept God's will.

Hannah's faith, Elizabeth's faith and Mary's faith in God was their first preference in life over what else the world offered. Such a faith is worthy of emulating. The mention of these three families connects Jesus with the family of David, the lion of Judah. It also confirms the prophecy that Jesus would come from the line of David.

The events following Jesus' birth—the shepherds' visit, the star's light, and the angels' singing—convinced Mary that God chose her to bear the savior of the world. This conviction resulted in Mary's shame receding. Mary's fear and doubts of being killed wore away, as well as her shame and that of her husband. We know that Joseph also bore shame and blame from doubting close family members who knew he was marrying a pregnant girl. The birth of Jesus brought joy to his earthly parents and to the Israelites who chose to believe in him. He brought joy to global sinners.

Everywhere Jesus went, those present experienced joy even before he was born. When Mary visited Elizabeth, her baby inside her belly "became happy and moved within me". The angels announced to the shepherds that Jesus "will make everyone happy". Jesus is merciful to everyone who worships him. The world continues to praise Jesus and say wonderful things about him.

I am convinced that we have experienced both worldly and spiritual joy. I recall the joy I felt when I passed 12th grade examinations. That sense of joyful accomplishment led to thoughts of getting a paying job and living a better life. The same joy was felt when I met my husband. Still another bundle of joy was the day I saw my first child, realizing this is my real kid! (However, the birthing was no fun!) This joy was soon met with unexpected sleepless nights, cleaning diapers, and preparing light food. I often wondered "Is this what I expected?"

Some or almost all joys come with their own consequences: some relaxed, some frightening, and some delightful! However, the joy of submitting my life to Christ is the best of all joys of my life. Being in Christ is the most the rewarding decision I ever made! When life gets hard, I run to the cross and Christ gives me wisdom. When I mess up, I go back to Christ expressing remorse, and Christ forgives me and reassures me my sins are washed away and I am a new creation. Christ's joy cannot compare with all other joys I have experienced throughout life. Often the world's joys come with strings, but Christ's joy is a gracious gift that continues giving. The only condition I know is to "watch and pray you and not get tempted"

I have seen with my own eyes Jesus changing evil people's lives and giving them the joy, they never had before salvation. Some became very honest leaders of the church and the world. Some became very devoted husbands and wives. Some became great teachers and pastors. I have seen Christians who have wandered away from their faith and lived opposite of their past Joys.

How I pray for Christians to stay put in their spiritual journey and not allow evil thoughts or evil practices to muddy their journey of the cross.

May we continue to repent, work for peace and experience Christ's joy this season. Jesus calls us to the life of the cross,

Amen