

## **Sermon for Zion, January 27, 2019**

**Hymns:** 78 – This is the day; 420 – Praise, I Will Praise You, Lord; “Bless the Lord, O My Soul”; 410 – Joyful Joyful

**Scripture:** Psalm 126:2-3; John 15:9-12; Galatians 5:22-23

**Sermon Title:** Full of Joy through the Holy Spirit

### ***Psalm 126:2-3***

*Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

### ***John 15:9-12***

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

### ***Galatians 5:22-23***

*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!*

“Cheer up, or you’ll get a spanking.” This is one of the more baffling child-rearing theories held by my father, that if a kid (usually me) wasn’t reacting to a particular situation with what my father felt was an appropriate amount of joy, this threat would somehow turn the situation around, and everyone would instantly be happy. I don’t remember my father ever following through, which is just as well.

Maybe your parents expressed this concept to you. Maybe you tried it out on your kids. What I didn’t realise until this past week was, my father got this idea from the Book of Deuteronomy. Turns out, my father was a theologian.

Deuteronomy is called “Deuteronomy” because “Deuteronomy” means “Second Law;” the Ten Commandments, which first appear in the second book of the Bible, “Exodus,” are restated a second time in the fifth book, Deuteronomy, hence the name. Deuteronomy is framed as the Farewell Speech of Moses, the summary of everything that has gone on from the time of the Exodus from Egypt to the moment, 40 years later, at which the Hebrew people are finally about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moses is 120 years old at this point, and still remarkably fit, but he knows he’s about to die, and it’s his last chance to set this cantankerous nation straight. And he does so in a remarkable sermon, given over eleven days, 33 chapters long. In

Chapter 34, Moses climbs Mount Nebo, with a view of the Promised Land he would never enter, and dies. The nation, we are told, “grieved for 30 days.”

In this amazing book, there are commandments, there are promises, there are blessings, there are grave warnings. Imagine distilling all the commands, all the examples, all the instructions, all the wisdom, all the warnings, all the life lessons your parents shared with you or you’ve shared with your children, and writing them all down in a single book. That’s Deuteronomy.

One of the commands – and here’s where my father’s theory begins to take shape – is to be joyful. It’s a command! It comes in Chapter 16 (:13-15), in the midst of instructions concerning a seven-day Harvest Festival, still celebrated by Jews to this day. Listen:

*Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your festival— you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the festival to the Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.*

“Be joyful at your festival.” For the grammarians among you, that’s the imperative case – “**Be** joyful.” Not, “Hopefully you’ll be happy,” or, “Maybe, if everything is just right, you might suddenly feel joy.” No, it says, “**Be** joyful.” It’s a command.

And it’s a command that comes with a warning. Listen, as Moses is building up to a stirring conclusion, in a chapter entitled “Blessings and Curses for Disobedience,” which is at turns both heartwarming and terrifying, Moses says this (Deuteronomy 28:47-48):

*Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the Lord sends against you.*

Or, in the Hermann Rollwage paraphrase, “Cheer up, or you’ll get a spanking.”

Being joyful in the time of prosperity, says Moses, is a sign of gratitude. What do we call a child who is still miserable despite all sorts of blessings? Spoiled. A lack of joy implies a lack of appreciation. It implies ingratitude. It says, “No matter the blessings I’ve received, I’m still miserable. All those blessings aren’t good enough.”

Spoiled. The command to be joyful, is the command to be grateful – to take time to realise the blessings you have, and to express appreciation for them. It’s a change in gratitude, which results in a change in attitude.

All of us will agree with both Moses and my father, that being joyful in a time of prosperity is a sign of gratitude, and should come naturally. And the Bible is filled with this very idea; those who consider the Bible to be a gloomy sort of book will be surprised to learn that if you search the Bible for words such as sadness and sorrow, mourning and grief, you come up with a total of about 80 occurrences. But if you search for joy, gladness, happiness and rejoicing, you’re over 500! The Bible is serious about joy. So serious, it commands it. *“Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him (Psalm 33:1).”* Singing joyfully, not because it is how we happen to feel, but because it is “fitting” – it is the right thing to do.

In light of this, it is ironic that out of the 837 hymns in our Presbyterian hymnbook, there are only 16 with the word “Joy” in the title. That’s 2 percent. In contrast, The Psalms, which is the Bible’s hymnbook, scores 57 out of 150 – a solid 38 percent. Our hymnbook, and perhaps our gloomy Presbyterian heritage, is letting us down, here, because singing joyfully is a command. It is the right thing to do. *“Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,”* commands Isaiah (12:6), *“for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”* *“Sing for joy to God our strength,”* agrees the Psalmist (81:1); *“shout aloud to the God of Jacob!”* These aren’t suggestions. These are commands.

But what about when things are not going well? What about when the news is not good, the situation bleak, the circumstances dire? What then? The Prophet Habakkuk, from whom we seldom hear, one of the fellows we call “The Minor Prophets,” faced this very problem. But he wrote this (Habakkuk 3:17-18):

*Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!*

Obviously, Habakkuk is talking about a different kind of joy here; a joy based not on external circumstances, but upon a determination – a decision – to be joyful, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves. It is, surprisingly, the determination of which we sang in our happy little opening hymn, “This is the Day.” Maybe you remember it: “This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice, and be glad in it.” That’s a statement of purpose, a determination to face the day with joy.

“This is the day” is taken from Psalm 118, which begins and ends with another command: *“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”* The Psalm recalls God’s acts of national and personal salvation, and declares, *“You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you.”* It is the very Psalm the crowds sang on Palm Sunday, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem: *“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession.”* Jesus was coming; the Messiah has come! And so the people gave thanks; they sang for joy, to the God of their salvation.

This kind of joy – a joy based upon our gratitude for and our relationship with the God of our salvation – is what the Bible calls “the Joy of the Lord.” The joy which comes from knowing that there is a God who created us, and that we are not just random products of chaos and chance. The joy that we are not anonymous and unknown, but there is a God who knows us, and who cares. The joy that our lives are not without purpose, for there is a God who has a plan and a task for each of us to do and to live. The joy that the wrong we have done is not eternal, but that the forgiveness God gives through Jesus Christ lasts forever. The joy of knowing that we are not alone, but we are united with our Saviour, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, part of a family that extends around the world and throughout time. This is the true source of joy, of joy that fills us to overflowing, of joy that lasts no matter the circumstances. This isn’t only joy as a source of happiness and good feeling. This is joy as a source of strength.

It’s joy not based upon however we happen to be doing at any given moment, but upon the assurance of who we are and who God is – the God who loves us and will never let us go. This is why Habakkuk, when crops had failed and fields lay barren, could say, *“yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!”* This is why Paul, in the midst of imprisonment, could write these words (Philippians 4:4-7 NRSV):

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

This is why James, facing a sentence of death, shepherding a church under tremendous pressure and persecution, could write (James 1:2-4):

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

This is why Jesus, fully aware that mere hours away lay long nightmare of the arrest, the trial, the beatings, the scourging, the humiliation, the torment, the cross; on the very brink of that abyss, this is why Jesus could say to his gathered, worried, friends (John 15:9-12):

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

The Joy of the Lord is based upon the knowledge that God loves us, has saved us, has blessed us with life now, and with life eternal. For Moses, for the Psalmist, for Habakkuk, for Paul, for James, for Jesus, that’s enough. That’s enough to face each day with joy.

And that’s why Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, who themselves were going through some pretty tough times, included “Joy” in his list of the Fruit of the Spirit - right after love. Now, remember that Paul, in compiling this list, is laying out the characteristics of a life lived in the power of the Spirit of God; that is to say, he’s more or less composing a personality sketch of Jesus. Listen again:

*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

Doesn’t that sound like Jesus to you? Jesus, who had a far from easy life – misunderstood by his family, rejected by his home town, abandoned by his friends, wanted by the authorities, not so much as an extra pair of sandals or a pillow for his head - yet who was so suffused with the Spirit of God that he was nothing less than the very embodiment of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And that same Spirit, the same Holy Spirit which shone through Jesus, is the same Holy Spirit which dwells within all who open their hearts and lives to Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The characteristics of Jesus, as we grow and mature in the Faith, as we allow the Holy Spirit to take root within us, become our characteristics too. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control become more and more of who we are.

Not only that, those very characteristics are the signs to others that we are the followers of Jesus, that we are the children of God. We’re familiar with the verse in the Gospel of John (13:35), when Jesus says, *“By this everyone will know that you are my*

*disciples, if you love one another;*” or as the song goes, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” But perhaps you’re less familiar with the Psalm which says (Psalm 126:2-3):

*Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”  
The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

The joy of the people of God was a sign to the nations that “*The Lord has done great things for them.*” Joy is a cornerstone of our witness to the world. The song should also go, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our Joy.” Let’s admit that our Presbyterian reputation for sombre gloom doesn’t fit with the Scriptural ideal. Our primary characteristics are to be the Fruit of the Spirit, which begin with Love and Joy. We are to be the Joyful People of God. People who face the day with optimism. People filled with gratitude. People who find their strength in joy. And so Paul prayed (Colossians 1:12), “*May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father.*”

But what about when joy seems impossible, when the circumstances of life cause despair to overwhelm our hearts? I can only point to a family I knew many years ago, who had lost a young child in a tragic accident. How do you wake up each day and face that reality? “I wake up,” his mother said, “and force myself to remember his joy. The joyful times we shared. His laughter. His silly games. And I thank God for those moments of joy. And I thank God I will see him and hold him again.” I pray I shall never know such loss. I pray you shall never know such loss. But if such loss should come, I pray we will find comfort in joy; in the hope we have in Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to his people who despaired: “Do not grieve, as those who have no hope...” We have hope. We always have hope. In in that hope, may we find joy.

So my friends, begin each day thanking God for all that God has done, does, will do in your life; for all that God provides; for the gift of this new day. Begin each day with a prayer for God to help you to love others, for God to bring you joy. Begin each day determined to share love and to find joy in the smallest and the greatest of blessings, and to express joy as a witness to all whom you meet. Remember that God loves you, and has demonstrated that love for you in the gift of Jesus Christ; and that the Holy Spirit dwells within you. That you are in the palm of God’s hand; that God, whose love endures forever, will never let you go.

*Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”  
The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

Amen.