



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Christ is Risen. . . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

If you were here last Sunday, today's Gospel lesson from John will sound super familiar, at least the first four verses as I used them last week to talk about abiding in Jesus. I touched on verse 11, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." This morning I would like to look at JOY in more depth.

But first a story by Gordon Pike. He said, "I heard a story about a woman who was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift, only to find out that it had sold out days before. Her arms were full of bulky packages when the elevator door opened. Of course, it was full!

The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to make a small space for her and her load. As the door closed, she blurted out: "whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing out to be arrested, strung up, and die a slow and painful death." A few occupants of the elevator nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then someone from the back of the elevator piped up: "He already did."

Yes, Jesus was arrested, strung up and died a horribly slow death on the cross so we could have forgiveness, an abundant life here on earth and the promise of eternal life in heaven with Him one day. And it is true that Christmas is a stressful time for most adults and a happy time for children. It can be a very depressing time for others who face grief from losing a loved one or the loneliness that comes from the first holiday without their loved one. It is so busy with parties to plan, parties to attend, gifts to buy, meals to cook, goodies to bake and maybe even a long trip to make. Or it can be a joyful time to celebrate what God has done for us, sending his Son to walk among us.

And so, we have written some 300 years ago a most heartfelt song by Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World". We think of it as a Christmas hymn but actually if you look closely at the words, it only hints at Jesus' birth. Truly it is an awesome song of praise. And it's words come from Psalm 98, verses 4-9 specifically. As commanded in Verse 4, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth, break forth into joyous song and sing praises!"

I think that today most people are looking for happiness in their lives. Pretty much everyone wants to be happy. We see that in our society over and over again. People work hard so they can buy the possessions that they think will make them happy. People turn to hobbies, sports, entertainment, or even various addictions to try to find happiness. I read an interview someone did with Madonna, and they asked her if she was happy. Her response was, "I am a tormented person. I am wrestling a lot of demons. But I want to be happy. I have moments of happiness. I am working towards knowing myself and I assume that will bring me happiness." Pretty typical response I suppose that could come from multitudes of people.

What people today do not realize is that happiness and joy are two very different things. The dictionary defines happy as being delighted over a particular thing, something that makes you feel pleased. What do you think if I ask what makes you happy? To me it is when things are going along good with circumstances in my life being quiet. Somehow that has not "happened" much in the Downing household lately. We all know that circumstances in life can change in a blink of an eye, someday only to relieve our boredom.

Scripture is rather quiet about happiness. That word is not one you hear in Biblical texts. However, you do hear the word JOY often. In the Bible joy comes not from our circumstances or stuff that has happened to us or things we have possession of, but a deeper inner sense of well-being. This inner sense has little to do with things going on in life. Joy has nothing to do with possessions or entertainment or sports or money. And folks, joy does not come from you or from knowing yourself. True joy only comes from one source. And so, Isaac Watts says, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her king; let every heart prepare Him room, and Heaven and nature sing."

Jesus is the true source of joy. When you receive in your heart, Christ as King, your life will be filled with inexplicable joy. He will provide you with more joy than you have every known. His joy will fill that hole in your soul that happiness cannot do for longer than your circumstance or stuff remains. When you allow Jesus into your life, your heart as the song says, will be filled with joy.

If we look at stanza two in Watt's hymn, we are not only to recognize Jesus as King, king of our lives and king of our hearts, but also king over all of creation. This is a great step to finding joy. Letting Jesus, the Savior reign in your life. That means letting go and let God. And boy I suspect like me that this is one of the hardest things to do, give up control to God. You know me, I love to be in charge or at least think that I am! Once we realize we cannot go it on our own without messing it up, it is a bit easier to let God be in control.

Yes, we often want the good things God has to offer but are not willing to go the extra mile and let Him reign in your life. We must do this, or we will miss out on the joy that comes from accepting and allowing Jesus to be the king in our world. That means even in our business dealings, in our relationship with our spouse or our neighbor. Too many people today say that Jesus is the King of their lives but do not live up to the responsibility that comes with that. You can fool others, you can fool yourself sometimes, but you can never fool Jesus. He knows what is in your heart.

When we give up our lives to Jesus, we live life differently. First, we repent for all the things that have caused us not to allow Jesus in and then the things we have done to hurt others in our search for "true happiness". Verse 3 of Joy to the World" addresses this. "'No more let sin and sorrow grow that thorns infest the ground. He come to make his blessings flow far as the curse if found."

So don't let your sin bog you down. Deep down you have to recognize your sin as sin so that you will not want to hang on to it any longer. And the world often tells us that sin promises happiness. What I mean is that stepping on someone else to get to the top, might give you a few morsels of happiness, but it is fleeting. Repentance is what brings true joy. So, if you don't repent, you will not find real joy.

There is a famous story of a believer in Zimbabwe, who tried to give a New testament to a very disgruntled man. The disgruntled man insisted that he would tear out the pages and use them to roll his cigarettes. (Interesting idea!) The believer replied, "I understand, but at least promise to read each page before you smoke it." The disgruntled man agreed and the two went their separate ways.

Fifteen years later, the two men met at a Christian convention in Zimbabwe. The "disgruntled" man had found Christ and was now a full-time evangelist and the guest speaker at the convention. He told the audience this story and then said, "I smoked Matthew, and I smoked Mark but when I got to John 3:16 I couldn't smoke no more. My life changed from that moment."

When we understand what God has done for us by sending his son and when we let this Son Jesus in our hearts as our Lord and King, we experience true joy. Our lives are ruled by Jesus, a relationship is created with him, and he sends us His joy. His joy comes with the truth about His amazing grace. We confess that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Verse four of Joy to the World says it well, "He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and (here it is folks!) and wonders of His love."
WOW

I want to close with a story that I think illustrates the heart of Watt's carol. An author named Bret Harte wrote a story about the wild West called "The Luck of Roaring Camp."

Roaring Camp was the meanest, toughest mining town in all the west. There were more murders and thefts there than anywhere else around. Roaring Camp was inhabited entirely by men ... except for one woman who made her living in the only way she knew how. Her name was Cherokee Sal.

Eventually Cherokee Sal became pregnant and gave birth to a baby. She died in childbirth ... no one knew who the father of the child might be. The men put the baby girl in a box with some old rags under her. Somehow that just didn't sit right ... so one of the men rode 80 miles to buy a rosewood cradle. When they put the rags and the baby in the beautiful new cradle, the rags just didn't look right ... so another man rode to Sacramento and purchased some silk and lacy blankets. The men lined the rosewood cradle with silk and tucked the new blanket around the little girl ... but then they all noticed that the floor under the cradle looked dirty. The next thing you knew, a few of those big, rough men got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed the floor until it was spotless. Of course, that made the walls and the ceiling, and the dirty windows look awful ... so they washed down the walls and the ceilings, cleaned the windows, and hung white curtains in them.

Things were beginning to look a lot better ... but they soon realized that they had to give up their carousing and fighting. After all, the baby needed a lot of sleep and babies can't sleep during a brawl. Besides all that, the baby didn't like angry voices and mean, frowning faces ... so the men started smiling and talking in pleasant, cheerful tones. And, since babies shouldn't be left alone, they set the cradle by the entrance of the mine. One of the men would stay next to her while the others worked. That's when somebody noticed how ugly the mine entrance was, so they planted some

flowers in front of it and planted a small garden near the cradle. And as they worked, the men looked for shiny little stones that they could show to the baby to make her gurgle and coo ... but when they held the stones down near her, they saw that their hands looked black and dirty. And, not wanting to scare the little baby with their scraggly hair and wild bears, the general store soon sold out of soup and shaving gear.

The baby changed everything. And that story gives us a small picture of the way that the Son of God can transform our lives. Is the Bethlehem child your Lord and King? Does He reign over your heart? Your soul? Your world? Has the Bethlehem child changed your life? Ask yourself these questions because if He is your Lord and King ... if He reigns over your heart and soul ... if He has changed your life ... then He rules over your heart and soul and life with perfect truth and grace, then you can't help but sing Joy to the world! Amen

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