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Joy Over Fear

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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One of the things my wife Jill does throughout the year is take photographs of sunsets on Long Pond which we can walk to from our home. Those of us who live on Cape Cod have the joy of being able to see the sun rise and set over the water if we choose. Seeing the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, recognizing the warmth and light the sun provides as well as its reliability, it isn't a surprise that numerous ancient cultures worshipped the sun. Christians don't worship the sun but the God who made the sun and everything else. Connections between light and God's power, presence, and glory are found throughout the Bible, starting in the beginning. The Bible opens saying that *"the earth was a formless void **and darkness** covered the face of the deep,"* and **Genesis 1:3** declares, *"Then God said, **'Let there be light'; and there was light.**"* The first act of creation is God speaking **light** into being and **light was good** and **"God separated the light from the darkness"** (Genesis 1:4).

Later **Psalm 27:1** affirms, *"**The Lord is my light and my salvation,**"* and **Psalm 36:9** proclaims, *"**With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.**"* In Luke 2 the prophet Simeon, guided by the Spirit, took the baby Jesus in his arms, and praised God, saying Jesus would be (Luke 2:32), *"**a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.**"*

Images of light and darkness permeate the Gospel of John. John begins his Gospel by telling us that **in Jesus there is life which is the light of all people and that light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not and will not ever overcome it. Jesus is the true light which enlightens everyone.** In John chapters 8 and 9, Jesus declares he is **"the light of the world"** and demonstrates the truth of his statement by giving light to the eyes of a man born blind.

John the Baptist, who had a significant number of followers himself, is portrayed in John's Gospel as identifying himself as a witness who came to testify to **the light** who is Jesus. Listen to **John 1:6-8, 19-28**, "There was a man **sent from God**, whose name

was John. **He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.** He himself was not **the light**, but he came to testify to **the light**.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, **"Who are you?"** He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, *"I am not the Messiah."* And they asked him, *"What then? Are you Elijah?"* He said, *"I am not."* *"Are you the prophet?"* He answered, *"No."* Then they said to him, **"Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"** He said, *"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.* Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, *"Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"* John answered them, *"I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."* This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing."

John the Baptist was sent by God "as **a witness to testify to the light**, so that all might believe through him." John was a witness because could speak about Jesus from personal experience, he was his cousin, and he knew and baptized Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit inspired and empowered the first Christian witnesses to share the remarkable news about Jesus everywhere they went. The disciples couldn't keep their experience of Jesus to themselves. Everywhere they went – crossing barriers of race, culture, class, and gender, they bore witness to the good news that there was forgiveness of sins, life transforming power, and a new sense of identity, purpose, and community available through Jesus Christ.

This good news is the reason why joy is associated with Jesus and following Christ. Joy is second after love in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. We're one week from celebrating the birth of Christ because for almost 2,000 years faithful Christians have been effective witnesses in telling others the good and joyful news about Jesus. This chain of joy began with John the Baptist testifying that Jesus was the light of the world.

I'm thankful for people like John the Baptist and millions of others who were courageous and bold enough to witness to others about Jesus. All of us who are believers today, have come to faith because others in previous generations have been faithful witnesses. Hopefully all of us could identify members of our family, Sunday School teachers, Pastors, Youth Group leaders, camp counselors, coaches, or friends who bore witness to Jesus, and the joy of being his follower and helped us along the road of faith. Those people are special to us, we're grateful for them, and many of them are part of that great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. The Lord also calls us **to be joyful witnesses** to the light of Jesus for other people.

As we approach the celebration of Jesus' birth, it's a good time to remember that Jesus came to give us joyful, abundant, and eternal life. Three times in John's Gospel Jesus speaks, not of an occasional burst of happiness but of complete joy. **The first time in John 15:11, Jesus is speaking of our relationship with him.** Jesus says one of the reasons he came was ***"so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*** As we're united with Jesus through his word, prayer, and loving obedience the result in our lives will be joy. Jesus wants us to have the complete joy that comes from a personal and lasting relationship with the loving and gracious God who gives us life. If we've got the joy of Jesus down in our heart, it should show on our face. Christians shouldn't go through life looking perpetually angry or aggrieved or as if we've been sucking on lemons because following Jesus leads to joy. If we practice our faith correctly, the fruit of joy will begin to grow and become increasingly evident in our lives over time. Having the joy of Jesus in our lives, can enable us to face life, even in challenging and heart-breaking times, with an attitude that's marked by gratitude and joy that transcends our circumstances.

The second time Jesus speaks of Joy in John 16:22, 24b, he says to his disciples, *"So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you...Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete."* Pain, trials, and challenges come to all of us. We don't like them, but we should expect them and prepare ourselves to face them because it's not a question of if we will face them, just what form they will take, and how we will face them. The Letter of

James reminds us of this truth (1:2-4), *“My brothers and sisters, **whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy**, because you know that the testing of your faith produces **endurance**; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may **be mature and complete** (there’s that word again), lacking in nothing.”*

The third time Jesus speaks of joy is in his farewell discourse in John 17:13, he says in a prayer to the Father, *“But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world **so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves**.”* Jesus is praying for his followers to understand that his death is not cause for sadness, because he’s returning to the Father. Jesus is praying that his followers will be united, even as Jesus and the Father are one. In John’s gospel, **the arrival of Jesus is cause for joy and the departure of Jesus will bring joy as well**. It’s hard for us to think of joy and death at the same time, yet how we view death is transformed by our faith. When my dad died and our family was here in October, one of the things that gave me comfort and joy was holding our grandson, Caleb. (Photo) Our son Nathan describes Caleb as an “emotional support baby,” because everyone who holds him feels better. That’s true for me. As my dad was near the end of his life, he said to us regarding Caleb and Greg and Marci expecting their first child in January, *“This is the way it’s supposed to be, one generation departs, and another generation is beginning.”*

There are all kinds of fears that can cause us to lose our joy beyond losing those we love. One of those is the fear of losing our sense of value, self-worth or importance. In **John 3:25-30**, the disciples of John the Baptist come to him afraid that he’s losing market share to Jesus, *“Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, **and all are going to him**.”* But John the Baptist isn’t upset about this development, it means he’s done his job, and he says, *“The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, **rejoices greatly** at the bridegroom’s voice. **For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.**”* John’s words are good advice for having the joy of Jesus. Having the joy of Jesus comes from being united with Jesus through our habits, attitudes, and decisions so that Jesus is increasing in us, and our old self is decreasing. Jesus must increase within us

and our old nature, our selfish self, our prideful self, our addicted self, our self-sufficient self, our fearful self and all our other selves must decrease.

Jesus radiated **joy**; that's part of what made him attractive to all kinds of people: children and adults, the troubled, the grieving, tax collectors, people from all walks of life. People who were nothing like Jesus, *liked* Jesus. Could the same be said of you and me? The only people who didn't like Jesus were the religious people who thought Jesus hung around with the wrong crowd, went to too many parties, and gave God a bad name. Having the joy of Jesus comes through praying for God's Spirit to grow the fruit of joy within us in all circumstances. It comes through the practice of gratitude. We can be encouraged knowing this is not only our prayer, **but Jesus prayed and is still praying that we may have his complete joy in our lives.** Jesus wants you to have his joy and his followers should be among the most joyful people around because we know Jesus as our Lord, Savior, Teacher, and Friend.

Wars are raging around the globe. Here, in one of the world's richest countries, millions live in poverty. Our government seems to be in a perpetual state of chaos. It's easy to live in a kind of dread that permeates our hearts, minds, and souls. While it's important to deal with the reality of the suffering in the world, it's also important for us not to be overwhelmed by it. Joy is an essential antidote in a suffering world. When we go Christmas caroling as we did yesterday (**Photos**) it not only gives joy to those we visit, but it also brings joy to those who go caroling. My mother always said, *"Whenever you're feeling down, go do something for someone else."*

Proverbs 17:22 (ESV) tells us, **"A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."** For followers of Jesus, joy is not just a perk of the Christian life; it's a spiritual resource that helps us live out our discipleship and carry out our work in the world. Our joy rests in the knowledge of what God has done and will continue to do. Our joy is not dependent on what's happening in the world; it's a commitment to see good and recognize the presence of good in the world and in ourselves, regardless of our circumstances. Joy is the product of our relationship with Jesus and our knowledge of God's movement and work in our lives.

Tapping into joy helps us fight injustice and work toward good for all. Joy keeps us going when we want to give up and reminds us that suffering is an experience and not a destination. Ross Gay writes in “The Book of Delights” about his decision to find delights intentionally daily. He says of the process: *“I felt my life to be more full of delight. Not without sorrow or fear or pain or loss. But more full of delight.”* Joy and sorrow can, and will, coexist. To be intentional about accessing joy is to have a practice of making time for the things that help us feel most content, at peace and close to God. For some, it may be physical exercise or spending time with our most beloved friends or family. For others, it might be time in nature, crafting, or cooking. For others, it might be listening to music, committing to a spiritual practice, or playing a game. The key to having joy as a resource is deciding to make it a part of our lives. **We must actively seek out joy rather than waiting for it to come to us.** It’s said misery loves company, but so does joy and joy is more fun and throws better parties.

When we focus on our fears, that drains us of joy. We all know the difference between a drain and a well. Drains are things that deplete and exhaust us. Wells are things that energize and excite us. Wells refill our proverbial cups, while drains cause them to empty. Identifying the drains and wells in our lives is important. When we’re able to identify the wells, we can be intentional about having access to them so that we never get empty. This is the power of joy! Our ability to access joy regularly and often allows us to operate from a place of overflow rather than depletion. Joy sustains us for the journey. What would it be like to organize our lives around our joys, just as biblical cities were built around wells?

I invite you to look for signs of joy this week. Look for where people are being restored. Look for where people are being healed, being valued, being dignified. Also look for ways that you can be a sign of joy to someone else. As others have been a sign of joy to you, how can you be a sign of joy to them as well? With this as a goal and a practice, we’ll start to see the kingdom of heaven at work. We’ll experience hope and peace. As Nehemiah 8:10 declares, *“Do not grieve, **for the joy of the Lord is your strength.**”*

Blessing: Do you know what it is like in the presence of God? 1 Chronicles 16:27 says, ***“Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and Joy in his dwelling place.”***

Psalms 16:11 assures us, ***“In your presence there is fullness of joy.”***

May the joy of Jesus be with you this week!

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If you've ever served as a witness at a trial, or simply enjoy watching TV shows or movies that involve trial scenes, what do you think makes for a credible witness? What can you do to be a credible and convincing witness for Jesus?
2. Do you associate Jesus with joy? Why or why not? Why do you think Jesus speaks three times in John's Gospel about his joy and our joy?
3. The first time Jesus speaks of joy in John 15:11 he is speaking in terms of our relationship with him. How does having a close relationship with Jesus impact our joy?
4. The second time Jesus speaks of joy in John 16:22-24 he also talks about pain. How does the joy we have in Jesus help us in times of pain, hardship, or suffering?
5. In his prayer for his followers in John 17:13, Jesus talks about joy even in the face of his pending death. How does having the joy of Jesus help us even in times of death and loss?
6. What's one thing you can do to deepen and fill your well of joy and to cultivate and demonstrate the joy of Jesus in your life? Why is having joy important to being a faithful witness to Jesus?