

During this season of Advent, each Sunday we have been lighting different candles on the Advent wreath. Each candle represents a gift from God. On the first Sunday of Advent we lit the Candle of Light which represents Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, who came to drive the darkness out of our lives if we will just let Him. Last Sunday we lit the Candle of Hope which gives us the blessed assurance that God is always there for us, loving and caring for us no matter what life may throw our way.

This morning let discuss the third candle, the Candle of Joy and what it represents. Traditionally, the third Sunday of Advent is known as “Gaudete Sunday” which is Latin for “rejoice.” So on this Sunday we light the pink candle of joy. There are many references in the Bible to joy and rejoicing, but the most appropriate one for this season of the year is found in the story of the shepherds on the hillside outside of Bethlehem as recorded in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 8 through 15.

Read Luke 2:8-15

Of course, we will read this passage again on Christmas Eve, but this morning I want us to focus on the tenth verse where the angel of the Lord says: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.” Did you hear that: “good news,” “great joy,” and “for everybody?” In Matthew’s account of the wise men bringing their gifts to the baby Jesus, it states: “Behold the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.” The birth of Jesus was a sign of God’s love and abundant grace for all people. Joy and celebration are the only appropriate responses to such a gift.

Does this Good News bring joy and cause you to celebrate or are you just going through the motions this Christmas season following the lead of most people and the commercial world? Over 2500 years ago, the prophet Isaiah looked out on a people who also longed for happiness and security but were looking for it in all the wrong places. They were running to the marketplace and to places of amusement, spending their money madly for things that brought them no permanent satisfaction. Thus the question for today is - has the coming of Jesus Christ brought any change to this situation? Are we still looking for meaning in life in the wrong places?

Do we have joy in our hearts this Christmas season? Or have we let demands, tasks, relationships weigh us down? Do you feel joyful this morning? What makes you happy? Where does real joy come from? Is there a difference between joy and happiness? These are questions that many people ask. But as Christians, hopefully, we have discovered that true joy

comes only from following Jesus and living by the great commandments to love God and to love our neighbor.

In his book *Pease with God*, Billy Graham says that joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. G. K. Chesterton said that joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian life. Joy is the atmosphere in which Christians should live. It is not the same as happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens around us. But joy springs from deep down inside. And this spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus can give us this joy.

Dwight L. Moody explained the difference between joy and happiness like this. Happiness is caused by things, what happens around us. But joy flows right through trouble; joy flows on through the dark; joy flows in the night as well as in the daylight; joy flows through opposition; it is an unceasing fountain bubbling up in the heart; a secret spring which the world cannot see and knows nothing about. Joy is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of Christ in our lives. The Lord gives His children this constant joy when they walk in obedience with Him.

Unfortunately, today there is a lot of artificial whipped-up joy among Christians and churches, like the enthusiasm that cheerleaders can work up at a football or basketball game. I have seen pastors and speakers get up and shout: "I'm so excited." Then the congregation gets excited, but that is an emotion and as soon as they reach the parking lot, the feeling is gone as quickly as it appeared. It's a hollow feeling and unfortunately, it gives out when they need it the most because there's not enough of the Savior's joy in their hearts. They don't have the kind of joy that the Apostle Paul wrote about in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; I say again, rejoice."

Joy is a gift of God's amazing grace. It is not a matter of our feelings, which often run hot and cold, rising and falling depending on the prevailing winds that blow sometimes with us and sometimes against us. True joy is deeper than human experience. Happiness is an emotion, while joy is an attitude. Emotions come and go, but attitudes come and grow.

No other word so completely captures the Christmas spirit as the word joy. Think about it – if Christ is in your heart, then there should be joy in your life. And because of this indescribable joy, you can truly experience the spirit of this blessed season – the excitement of children opening their presents on Christmas morning; Christmas pageants featuring the angelic qualities of children; the choirs singing the old traditional Christmas songs; Grandma announcing that dinner is served; and the fellowship of loved ones and friends.

Underlying all these activities is the quiet confidence that God has indeed invaded our lives. Not only did He enter the human race on that first Christmas as a baby born in a manger, but He also wants to enter our individual lives today. In the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus said that He came to share in our life so that we might have joy and have it to the fullest.

Advent is the perfect time to pray and invite Jesus into our lives. My friends, the true wonder and joy of Christmas are based on the fact that our Savior came over 2,000 years ago to free us from the bondage of sin and death, so that we might have a share of the very life of God, now and forever. Joy is not a luxury of the Christian life. It is a sign that we are really living in a personal relationship with God, and that His love brings us great satisfaction. There are no sad saints; in fact a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms. If God is at the center of your life, joy is inevitable. However, if we have no joy, we have missed the heart of the Good News.

Yet, for some at Christmas, joy is absent. It is but a “hollow” day instead of a holiday. The “good tidings of great joy” is not real for them. Missing from their lives is the assurance that life has meaning. Unfortunately, they are lost in the artificial whirlwind of Christmas. The decorating, baking, gift buying, and other activities of Christmas are but one more hassle in their already gloomy lives.

But it doesn't have to be this way; the Candle of Joy lights the way to finding the joy that we are all desperately seeking and needing in our lives. And how do you receive this joy? The same way we receive the other gifts of light and hope, by accepting Jesus Christ into our hearts. Joy comes to us as a by-product of faith. In Jesus we have a light that can never be darkened; a hope that can never be disappointed; and a joy that can never be diminished.

When you accepted Jesus into your heart didn't you feel a special kind of joy? This is a joy that can only be experienced by those who have given their life to Jesus: the joy of being saved, the joy of being forgiven, the joy of being renewed, and the joy of being loved. As we have said before, Christmas can be a stressful time and it is easy for us to get down on ourselves and feel that we are all alone and that no one cares. But we must never forget that no matter how many times the world and others turn their backs on us, God never does. No matter how many times our friends, relatives and other people hurt us, God never does. It doesn't matter if we don't get any gifts this Christmas; God has already given us the greatest gift in the world, His Son and His grace. No matter how unloved and alone we may feel, God will always love us. As Christians, this is the assurance and the foundation of our joy.

And we find this assurance in the beautiful and joyful words of John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” God so loved us that on a dark night over 2,000 years ago, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be born in a simple stable, to face the criticism and rejection of His own people, and to die a cruel death on an old wooden cross out of love for you and for me. That is the joy that the angel announced to the shepherds on that hillside outside of Bethlehem that glorious night when he said “I bring you good news of great joy for all people;” for you and me – our Savior is born and real joy entered the world.

Joy had been absent from the world for centuries up to that time because people had turned their backs on God. So God came to us in the form of a baby – Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” God reached out to re-establish a relationship – a relationship of love and joy with His children, with you and me. Have you ever noticed that while the New Testament focuses on the cross, from beginning to end it is one of great joy? It begins with angels singing “Glory to God” on a hillside and ends with rejoicing around the throne of God. Wherever Jesus is – there is always joy!

True joy comes as a Christmas gift to each one of us. It comes from Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus, and with Jesus’ help, are we able to rejoice always. Since Jesus is always with us, there is no need for constant and overwhelming despair. Just the opposite is true. When we live in the light that Jesus brings into our lives, darkness cannot win. When our life is rooted in Jesus, and we are faithfully living out this relationship each and every day, then all of life can truly become joyful.

Now some of you may have heard that the letters in JOY, J-O-Y, means Jesus first, others second, and yourself last. But let me show you another way to look at this word: the “J” stands for Jesus; the “Y” stands for you; and the “O,” well the “O” stands for zero, nothing. It’s a great biblical formula. The way to experience the true joy of life and of this Christmas season is to let nothing, nothing get between you and Jesus Christ.

One Christmas Eve many years ago, as last minute Christmas shoppers hurried along the street, a crippled newsboy stood on his crutches offering his papers to each passerby. He looked happy, and his crutches were decorated with evergreens. One man greeted him with a cheerful smile and said: “My boy, you surely have the Christmas spirit.” To which the boy replied: “What’s the use of putting on a sour face? I may be poor, lame and not getting any presents, but that’s no reason for looking glum. So I decorated my crutches just to make them seem special for Christmas.” If we go out looking for joy, it will elude us. However, if we go out to impart joy, we will find it. This Christmas, whether you have little or much, it makes no difference. It’s your attitude that counts.

Jesus became like us so that we could become more like Him. Angels still sing, and the star still beckons. He came to bring us joy, not just joy at Christmas, but hopefully joy each and every day of our lives. He is truly the reason for the season. May you find joy this Christmas and may you rediscover Jesus Christ. And once you have, never let it go. Let there be joy in your life and let it begin with Jesus. Amen