Coming to Terms with Christmas: Joy Memory Verse: Luke 2:10-11 (HCSB)

Dec. 15th, 2024 Scripture Reading: 1 Chronicles 16:8-12;23-27
**SLIDE 1**

 Today we are going to continue coming to terms with Christmas. We are taking a close look at what the words of Christmas really mean. They are very easy to toss into a conversation. Words like hope and peace and our word for today: Joy. We know what these words mean, sort of, but I think our culture ends up paying a lot of lip service to these types of words. And as they are especially highlighted during this holiday season, I wanted to drill down a little and discover, from a biblical standpoint, the full meaning of these words.

Christmas time brings with it a whole lot of extra. Extra baking, extra decorating, extra traveling, extra money to buy gifts, extra time to wrap gifts, and after all is said and done, you now have extra stuff due to receiving gifts! Organizations ask for extra donations at this time of year. We even have an extra Christmas offering and an extra Christmas Eve service! But I wonder if all that extra equals extra joy

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…or extra stress?

Surely joy is a part of Christmas. We sing about it readily enough. “Joy to the World!” “O Come all Ye Faithful, joyful and triumphant.” We even have a song in our worship team’s repertoire simply called “Joy”. We are so joyful that we are driven to “Go and Tell it on the Mountain…over the hills and everywhere.”

It seems like extra joy should be a part of the Christmas experience. I know it is for our kids. They are ramped up and excited about Christmas. But my wife and I dismayed because we know what drives their extra joy.

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 It’s not so much the celebration of the coming of the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world. We know that they are excited about new stuff.

 New stuff that breaks within a week. New stuff that is not as cool as expected. New stuff that very quickly becomes old stuff. We know this is not what Christmas is about…we know this is not joy.

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Joy often gets conflated with happiness or cheer. But I want make sure that we distinguish joy as something else. Joy is not a mood or a fleeting moment. It is much more than our disposition. Joy or *chara* in the Greek is much more.

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 The apostle Paul considers it a fruit of the Spirit, as is peace which we talked about last week. But we need to give credit where credit is due: As a fruit of the Spirit, Joy does not originate within myself. Joy does not come from my surroundings or my circumstances. Joy is given by the Spirit. So we do ourselves a great disservice when we try to find joy in new stuff or better surroundings. That’s all a distraction. When it comes to my kids at Christmastime, all the gifts do not serve to bring joy. They are a distraction, an imposter. They claim to provide joy, they claim all the attention. All the extra stuff of Christmas shouts out “Over here look at me. Look at me!” While Jesus sleeps peacefully in the manger almost overlooked and unattended. Now I have picked on my kids quite a bit here. Yes, it is true that they easily fall for the distraction, but let’s not pretend that adults are any different.

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We like to hang on to the things that we call tradition. We derive a sense of meaning from Christmas traditions. It’s nice to do things the way they have always been done. But maybe it’s the newer developments that draw our attention. In my neighborhood, I swear there is an unspoken contest of who can put the most Christmas stuff in their yard. Decorations and inflatables and lights and all kinds of…stuff. These things are a distraction. It’s easy for us to accept happiness and call it joy. And I think we do that because joy is much harder to get at, it’s harder to find, at least on our own.

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Nehemiah was a man of God who mourned for Jerusalem, the city of God. It laid in ruins while he served the Babylon in his royal court as a wine taster. Nehemiah was in despair and dejected over the state of Jerusalem so much so that the king noticed. He said, “You seem upset Nehemiah…what’s wrong?” After Nehemiah explained, the king gave Nehemiah some time off of work, and he traveled to the place that God had promised his people. It was destroyed and desolate. The city did not even have walls around it. But, Nehemiah rallied the people who lived there and got to work. Physical labor was the answer to this problem. Through opposition and threats, Nehemiah and the people finished repairing the walls of the city in 52 days. But Nehemiah understood that rebuilt walls, no matter how secure they might be, do not create joy. So Nehemiah brings in

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Ezra the scribe. Then, in Nehemiah chapter 8, he gathers all the people together and has Ezra read aloud God’s law as written by Moses. Ezra reads to the people it says, “from daybreak until noon.” For many gathered, this was the first time they had heard God’s word. And it cut them to the heart. They realized how far they were from God’s intent and it caused them to weep. But take a look at verse 10. Nehemiah says to the people,

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 “do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Joy here is *chedvah.*

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And do you know how many times it occurs in the Old Testament? *Chedvah* specifically only shows up twice in all of the Old Testament. Now there are other similar terms used in other places. They also mean joy or gladness, but I wanted to focus on the less used *chedvah* because it points to something very important. In addition to Nehemiah referring here to the joy of the Lord, let’s look at the other use of *chedvah.*  It’s found in 1 Chronicles 16:27.

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 And Chronicles is one of the books of the bible that we call history because it is a narrative account that tells the story of Isreal’s past. Chronicles goes through and recounts each of the king who rules over Israel and Judah. But in chapter 16, the Chronicler, takes a break from the narrative story and inserts a poem. This is a song of thanksgiving written by king David. And he wrote it because the ark of God’s covenant was being returned to Jerusalem. If you remember, the ark was basically a sacred box that only the priests could handle. It was housed in the holiest part of the tabernacle and was the place God would meet with Moses. Inside this sacred box were the stone tablets of the law that Moses received from God. And as David rejoices over the coming of ark to his city, he writes a song of thanks. And in verse 27 he says, “Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and joy are in His place.”

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Here is *chedvah* again and again it is tied to strength. Strength and joy…the joy of the Lord is your strength. There is embedded in this word a resilience. We can endure, we can persevere because we are not simply happy, giddy, cheery people. We live in the joy of the Lord, and that makes us strong. Joy is not a giddy word, it is a gritty word. It stands among the rubble and persists. Joy does not need mistletoe and hot cocoa. Joy does not need a living room filled with wrapped boxes. Joy does not need another slice of pie. Joy comes from the Lord, and it makes us, not just happy, but strong as well. Strong enough to endure. Joy is gritty

*Chedvah* also come to us in reference to God’s word. Whether the scribe reads it aloud, or whether it is returning to the people as contained in the ark, God’s covenant that he has made with us and communicated to us brings joy. Joy is found in his word!

Finally, another parallel we find between these two uses of this word is the city of Jerusalem.

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There is rejoicing as David brings the ark of the covenant back into its walls and more rejoicing when Nehemiah later rebuilds those walls.

Centuries later, we see the same theme when it comes to the disciples in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, Peter and the other apostles are arrested by the teachers of the law in Jerusalem. They are told that they must no longer teach in the name of Jesus. Peter stands strong and proclaims that Jesus is the ruler and Savior of Israel, that in him can be found forgiveness of sins. After some discussion, these leaders have the apostles flogged and released.

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Acts 5:41 reads, “Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the name of Jesus.” Certainly being beaten for one’s faith is not a normal time for rejoicing. It is more likely a time for anger and protest. To be persecuted so unjustly sets the stage for revenge and bitterness. But Peter and the others, they choose a different road. They bear out the fruit of the Spirit. They know that the joy of the Lord is their strength. Their persecution will not distract them from this joy that comes from the Lord.

We are blessed to live in a country where we have religious freedom. We are not in danger of being arrested and hauled away for speaking in the name of Jesus. We won’t be flogged by the council of bishops who oversee our denomination. But there is a sense in which we must endure. We live in a culture that has lost the point of Christmas. A culture that has replaced meaning with distraction.

I want to challenge you, to encourage you to

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 keep your attention on the Word of God. That’s where David derived his joy, that’s where Nehemiah and his people derived their joy and the apostles only needed an opportunity to speak out in the name of Jesus in order to be filled with joy. Joy comes from the Lord and from his Word. We Christians have a very wonderful relationship with the term “Word of God.” We understand it to refer to the bible, the written word of God. We can read it and study it. We can memorize it and debate over it because it is here tangibly in written form, the word of God. But we also understand this term to mean Jesus Christ himself.

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Jesus is the Word of God. At Christmas we celebrate the Word becoming flesh. In Jesus we have the definitive, unobscured revelation of God. He has made himself known to us through His Word, both written and enfleshed. God has made Himself known! This is a reason to rejoice! God has come! He has made Himself known! He has made a way for us to be saved from the darkness of death and the grip of sin. Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

But we know, the distractions of the season will also come. We are entrenched in them. Our traditions and our stuff, they will try to take credit for any joy we might experience. But let us remember what joy really entails. It comes from God, from his Word.

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So there are few things we can do to help us experience the true joy of this holiday season. Here are a few suggestions:

* Keep God’s word at the forefront. Keep your bible nearby, keep it handy. Read it often. Meditate on it. Pick on of the gospels and read through the story of Jesus. Keep in mind who Jesus is and why he came to this earth in the first place. Maintaining a steady diet of scripture will help us quell the power of distraction.
* Be intentional about how you celebrate this season. Ask yourself, “Why do we do the things we do? Why are certain things traditional?” Having a good reason for our actions and activities helps to fill this season with meaning.
* Finally, in all the activity, in the whirlwind of preparations and traveling and celebrating, is there room to adjust? Is there room to slow things down, maybe to add some components that raise our eyes from the material stuff of this world and onto the Creator God who put all of this in motion? One way to slow down is to come to our Christmas Eve service. We hold one every year at 11:30 at night, so we can be sure to intentionally usher in our King Jesus. It’s a simple way to be intentional about this season, to set aside some time to acknowledge Jesus Christ, born in a manger, for the redemption of our souls.

In Luke’s gospel, chapter 2, verse 10, an angel appears to the shepherds in the middle of the night. He says to them,

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“Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord was born for you in the city of David.”

 Now an angel is a messenger. And his message was a report of a factual event. The shepherds are to go and find out, to go and verify this message. They do. They meet Jesus. They believe and they praise God. At one point, we were the shepherds. We received the message. We journeyed to verify. But now that we have seen and know the truth, now that we have met Jesus, we now stand with the angels as messengers, proclaiming good news! Reporting factual events! And telling again the reason why we have great joy in the Christmas season. “Today a Savior was born for you in the city of David!” Amen!