



# Great Joy

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
Luke 2:1-11

December 13, 2015

Friedrich was born in a small, German village in the year 1844. He came from solid Christian pedigree. His parents were devout Christians, his father a Lutheran pastor. Both of his grandfathers and an uncle were pastors also. His father read from Luke's gospel at his baptism, "What is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand is upon him" (Luke 1:66).

Friedrich demonstrated great promise in his youth when he wrote, "I have firmly resolved to dedicate myself forever to his service. May the dear Lord give me strength and power to carry out my intentions and protect me on my life's way. Like a child I trust in his grace. He will preserve us all, that no misfortune may befall us. May his holy will be done."

So, what happened? Friedrich became a staunch atheist in his adult years. He coined the phrase, "God is dead." He could be called the Darth Vader of Christianity, writing scathing critiques of the church. He derided Christianity as anti-life and anti-human. He regarded faith as little more than wishful thinking. The name of this 19<sup>th</sup> century celebrated atheist: Friedrich Nietzsche.

His primary quarrel with Christianity was with Christians. He wrote, "The problem of Christians is they have no joy." He went on, "It's not your arguments that tell against you—it's your faces." Listen to these haunting words, "I might believe in your redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."



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I am reminded of what Sheldon Vanauken writes, "The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians, when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and

smug...when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths.”

Today’s topic is joy. Last Sunday, it was peace and the Sunday before that, it was hope. Is there anyone here today not interested in finding hope, peace and joy?

Joy functions like a vital gauge on the dashboard of our Christian lives. If our indicator lights register that joy is in short supply, we would do well to heed its warning.

Joy is not putting on a happy face and wishing people a nice day. Biblical joy is far more substantial.

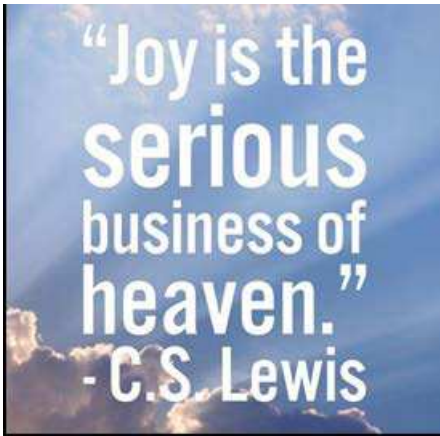
Joy plays a prominent role in this Christmas story. Luke begins his gospel with an account of a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. When Zechariah is serving in the temple, an angel says to him, “Do not be afraid. Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice at his birth” (1:14).

When Elizabeth is six months pregnant, her cousin, Mary, pays her a visit. As Mary greets her, Elizabeth’s baby in utero “leaps for joy” (1:44). Mary will give birth to a son who will become the Savior of the world (1:44).

Mary rejoices at the news that she will bear this Savior and breaks forth into a song called “the Magnificat.” “My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (1:46-47). Even Zechariah joins the celebration. “Praise be to the Lord, because he has come to his people and redeemed them” (1:68).



An angel announces Jesus' birth to shepherds on the hillside: "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy for all the people" (2:10). Not only joy, but great joy! Great joy is joy squared.



C.S. Lewis wrote an autobiography of his first 31 years that details his conversion from atheism to Christ. He titled it *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis defines joy as the longing for something transcendent. The pleasure of finding his longings satisfied by God is what leaves Lewis surprised by joy. He writes, in customary whimsical fashion, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

Joy is more than mere fun. Fun is temporal, while joy is eternal. Fun relies on external variables to make us happy while joy is not contingent on circumstances to make us happy. In fact, we can be joyful when things aren't going our way. Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord, again I say rejoice" while he is in prison (Philippians 4:4).

The prophet Habakkuk talks about joy in the face of adversity: "Even though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (3:17-18).

Joy is not some frothy, fake cheer. It's not putting on a happy face and feigning happiness. Biblical joy is deeper than happiness. It's more robust than the power of positive thinking.

There is much to be said for how positive thinking can create good outcomes. Yet, there is also a downside to excessive amounts of positive thinking. Barbara Ehrenreich makes this same point in her book, *Bright-Sided; How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America*. Barbara writes about her bout with breast cancer. She found all the smiley faces and positive-hyped messages to be rather thin and shallow as a help in treatment.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is utterly realistic about life in the real world. Life is hard, even messy sometimes. There is sin and death everywhere. Yet, we entrust our lives to the One who is able to triumph over sin and death.

The Westminster Confession of Faith was written in 1636. This classic creed expresses what English Puritans believe is true about God and His world. Puritans often get a bad rap in our secular culture. They are portrayed as dour and deadly serious. Yet, these same Puritans answer the first question in their Confession, “What is the chief end of man?” with the words, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” I would have expected these Puritans to have said our chief end is to glorify God and *obey* Him forever or *serve* Him forever. No, they said our chief end is to glorify God by *enjoying* Him forever.

Faith isn't some grim duty we perform. Paul writes, “The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Consider the Proverb, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (17:22).



Jesus offers us joy; infinite joy. In Christ, there is joy radiating in every direction—past, present and future.



We have joy because of what Christ has done for us. “If we confess our sins, Christ is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Our past has been forgiven. Christ offers forgiveness, complete pardon.

We have joy because of Christ’s presence with us. Jesus said, “I have taught you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full” (John 15:11). Joy is not found in success or material reward. Joy is deep delight in Jesus!

We have joy because Christ offers us a promising future. Part II of Handel’s Messiah celebrates Christ’s resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven. This second movement closes with the inspiring music of the Hallelujah Chorus, which is taken from Revelation 19: “Hallelujah, for the Lord Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory” (19:6-7).



We have joy because our past has been forgiven. We have joy because Christ is present with us. We have joy because our future with Christ is filled with promise.

So, what does this sermon have to do with my life? God offers us infinite joy. It’s yours for the taking.

Benjamin Franklin was speaking about the virtues of the new Declaration of Independence to a crowd gathered in Philadelphia. As Franklin described the constitutional guarantees to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, a heckler in the audience shouted, “Aw, them words don’t mean nothing at all. Where’s all this happiness you say it

guarantees us?” Franklin had a great comeback: “My friend, the constitution only guarantees the right to pursue happiness; you have to catch it yourself.”

Joy doesn't fall out of the sky. We must choose it. We must catch it ourselves.

Isaac Watts wrote in 1719, one of our most cherished carols, “Joy to the World! the Lord is come: Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room.”



There was no room at the inn for Jesus that first Christmas. It's been that way ever since. There's a sign posted on some people's hearts that reads, “No Vacancy.”

I was reading through the bulletin this morning and happened upon the story on our back cover. I had two thoughts. First, this is why Chris and I invest our time and money in this church. Second, this story applies to this sermon.

A young man attended our hypothermia week last year. He was homeless, living on the streets. He had never heard of Jesus before. He was invited to a Bible study. He began attending this church. He secured a job through a connection in this church. He now gives a portion of his wages as an offering to this church. He is in the process of opening his heart to Jesus.

Have you ever opened the door of your heart to Jesus? Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person and they with me” Revelation 3:20). If Jesus is knocking, by all means, open the door!

Some of you have taken the first step. You have opened the door of your hearts to Jesus. While you have taken the first step, little else has changed. There is still no room for Jesus.

I know people—I'm not naming names—that have garages so full of stuff that there is no place for their cars. Their cars are relegated to the driveway because the garage is crammed full with stuff.

Our lives are filled with so much clutter that there's no room in our hearts for Jesus. Let every heart prepare him room.

