

Advent 2020



Happiness vs. Joy

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Luke 1:30-50

December 13, 2020

Five years ago, Margaret Feinburg was writing a book on joy. She finished the manuscript and was two weeks away from sending it to the publisher when she received the news. Tests revealed a diagnosis of cancer. She took a deep dive into the world of surgery and chemotherapy. She became aware that her writing had concentrated primarily on looking for joy in the good times. Now, she had to find joy in the darkness. During her course of treatment, Margaret ruminated on the 400 references to joy in the Bible. She came to distinguish joy from happiness. She rewrote her book and titled it *Fight Back with Joy*.

Today's topic is joy. Last Sunday it was peace. Two Sundays ago, our focus was hope. Hope, peace and joy are what the world needs now.

My intent in this sermon is to recover the Biblical understanding of joy. We can be joyful even when we are not happy. I'll say more about joy and happiness later in this sermon but first the story.

Joy plays a prominent role in the Christmas story. Luke opens his gospel with a story about an old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are unable to conceive children. One day, while Zechariah is serving as priest in the temple, an angel tells 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" (Luke 1:14).

In the portion of Scripture read a few moments ago, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth after Mary learns the angelic news that she, too, will bear a son, who will be called "Son of the Most High God." When Mary enters Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth's baby in utero "leaps for joy" (Luke 1:44).

This causes Mary to break out into song which we call the Magnificat. She begins her song with the joyful words, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47).

Later in this same chapter, Elizabeth gives birth to John (as in Baptist), which prompts Zechariah to sing, “Praise be to the Lord...because he has raised up a horn of salvation for me” (Luke 1:68-69). There is so much singing in this story that it reminds me of *The Sound of Music*.

On the night Mary gives birth to Jesus, an angel announces to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, “Behold. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people” (Luke 2:14). Not merely joy, but *great* joy.

Joy is a much misunderstood word. Joy in the original Greek (*chara*) refers to well-being and contentment. Joy is more than putting on a happy face. It originates from a deeper source. While I’m all for having a nice day, surely we can do better than smiley faces and frothy cheer.

We Americans are infatuated with happiness. Take our ads. Virtually every brand is associated with happy, exuberant customers. Advertisers have discovered that happiness sells products. As I watch ads of smiling people driving new cars and fawning over the latest smart phones, I can’t help think to myself, these people cannot possibly be this happy. You know something? They’re *not* this happy. It’s a clever marketing strategy to get us to buy more things.

I titled this sermon *Happiness vs. Joy*. We use these two words interchangeably. They are related words in the Bible,

yet joy is the word that predominates. Why? Because joy goes deeper than happiness.

I can think of at least three ways these two words are different.

First, happiness is emotional.

Joy is enduring and resilient. Happiness relies on our moods and emotions. Joy is the settled disposition that whatever happens, God is in control. Joy brings well-being and contentment. Joy centers on what we believe, not how we feel.

Second, happiness is temporal. Joy is eternal.

The world offers us temporary happiness. Happiness brings momentary pleasures, yet joy gives long-term contentment. God's desire is not to make us happy. God wants to fill us with eternal joy. Why bother with fleeting happiness when infinite joy is offered to us?

C. S. Lewis wrote the story of his conversion from atheism to faith in Jesus Christ in a book titled *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis defines joy as the longing for something transcendent. Mere happiness can never satisfy these deep-seated longings. Joy is finding our deepest longings satisfied by God. This pleasure of Lewis finding his longings satisfied by Christ is what led him to be surprised by joy. He writes in his customary whimsical fashion, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." Joy is what God offers us.

Third, happiness is circumstantial. Joy is living beyond our circumstances.

Happiness is dependent on circumstances. Joy is independent of circumstances. Happiness is based on what is happening. It relies on a job promotion, good grades, or a clean bill of health to make us happy. Joy is living beyond our circumstances. We can experience peace and contentment regardless of the circumstances. The Bible makes it clear that we can be joyful even in trying circumstances. There can be chaos all around, yet we can remain calm on the inside.

James writes in his letter, “Consider it all joy when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (James 1:2-3). Are you kidding me? No, James is serious. It is possible for us to remain joyful even in unhappy moments.

I can have joy in COVID. I can be joyful despite this pandemic. Joy is the confidence, regardless of the worst that can happen, that God is with me. There is nothing that can separate me from God’s love in Jesus Christ.

. Isaac Watts chose to begin his 1719 Christmas carol with the words, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king.” “Happy to the world” doesn’t quite cut it. Joy goes further than happy.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life. I have two applications to suggest to you this morning.

Application #1: Recognize that your deepest longings can only be satisfied in Christ. Stop looking to temporal pleasures to make you happy. Resist the temptation to look to external circumstances to satisfy you. If only I had this much money. If only I had this relationship with this person.

If only I lived in this kind of house. Let me save you from a boatload of heartache. Only Christ can satisfy our deepest desires.

Benjamin Franklin was speaking about the virtues of the new Declaration of Independence to a crowd gathered in Philadelphia. As Franklin described the constitutional guarantee to “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” a heckler in the audience said, “Aw, them words don’t mean nothing at all. Where’s all this happiness you say is guaranteed us?” Franklin had a great comeback. “My friend, the Constitution only guarantees the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.”

Let me rephrase the words of our Declaration in Christian terms. God offers us life, liberty, and joy. Yet joy doesn’t fall out of the sky. We must choose it. We must catch it for ourselves.

This leads to my second application. Receive God’s invitation to joy through Jesus Christ. Begin a life with Christ or deepen your relationship with Christ. Stop complaining about COVID and bickering about partisan politics. Center your life in Christ this week.

I have 11 ideas to suggest to you of ways to establish your life in Christ in the coming week. Pick out one or more to practice this week. You can find more information on our new website. <https://www.viennapres.org/>

1. Attend our children’s musical *Back to the Manger* at 11:10 today.
2. Worship at our outdoor in-person service today in our parking lot at 1:00.

3. Engage in Advent for Everyone Monday through Friday. These five-minute video reminders each center on joy this week.
4. Enjoy the 20 minute Keith and Kristyn Getty Christmas musical greeting we are making available this Wednesday.
5. Join our Racial Reconciliation and Healing Zoom prayer gathering Friday noon.
6. Participate in Advent worship evening this Friday hosted by younger families.
7. Share in the Glorious Sounds Christmas concert next Sunday. We are putting together our greatest hits variety since we can't gather in person right now.
8. Help with hypothermia mission or other opportunities to serve this week. There is joy in extending beyond ourselves to help someone else.
9. Do a word study on joy in the Bible. Google the words, "joy in the Bible" and you will be refreshed by what Scripture declares about joy.
10. Compile a gratitude list. What a great exercise to do in COVID.

My 11th suggestion is the clincher. Open your heart to Jesus, right here, right now. There is no time like the present to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Decide today to follow Jesus Christ.