

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
A JOYFUL LIFE
MARCH 24, 2013
PALM/PASSION SUNDAY**

(READ LUKE 19:28-40 AT BEGINNING OF WORSHIP SERVICE)

What difference does it make that you're a Christian?

The question is a legitimate one,
coming from those who are curious,
or from those who are perhaps disdainful.

What difference DOES it make?

Well, we get to do this parade thing every year, a week before Easter,
when Jesus rides into Jerusalem.

And parades are fun!

Right?

Unless, of course, you are IN the parade.

When I was in high school,
our marching band was always in the parades here in San Antonio.

Hot and humid, full uniforms, mostly black, carrying our instruments,
playing and playing, marching and marching,
and occasionally being pelted with

whatever was thrown by people in the crowd.

I saw more than one band member faint from heat and dehydration.

Not fun.

But for the spectators... FUN!

Of course, that's not an issue for us as we think back on the parade that brought Jesus to town.

It's Jesus on a donkey,

palm branches and robes thrown down for a red carpet treatment,
an excited crowd sure they are seeing their messiah,
they can just taste the good things to come,
and his followers basking in the glow.

It was a parade, and for the crowd it was fun!

But this is not just about the parade.

It's about Jesus.

And deeper than fun, there is joy and rejoicing.

In fact, joy and rejoicing punctuate God's entire kingdom project throughout the Bible.

There is joy over the Hebrews being set free from slavery in Egypt,

joy at crossing into their promised land,

and joy in victory over enemies who threatened them as they establish their homeland.

There is King David dancing with joy

as they bring God's ark of the covenant into the city of Jerusalem.

The big national festivals were joyous celebrations of the goodness of God
seen in their history and in the latest harvest.

There were sacrifices to express their gratitude,

songs of praise and thanksgiving,

with voices, musical instruments, dancing and clapping,

and prayers of praise and thanksgiving

Celebrations of the goodness of God pouring out in blessing marked the life of Israel.

As we turn the page into the New Testament there is even more celebration, joy, rejoicing and thanksgiving.

But in the New Testament, it's a bit different.

In the New Testament there are expressions of joy that have nothing to do with external circumstances.

In fact, sometimes they seem to fly in the face of external circumstances!

Sometimes it is joy *in suffering*.

Joy in suffering.

I'm sorry.

I know we'd all prefer the Old Testament joy, where it's always tied to God having done something wonderful for us.

But I've got to go where Jesus leads.

I hope you'll follow along with me, to see what I mean.

Luke's Gospel says that when Jesus was born there was joy and rejoicing.

Even before his birth, a relative of his named Elizabeth praises God.

Her husband Zechariah sings.

Mary sings.

(Lk.1)

At his birth angels sing.

Shepherds praise God.

(Lk.2)

When he's 8 days old, brought to the Jerusalem temple, Simeon and Anna praise God for him.

(Lk.2)

It's one big love fest,

with joy and rejoicing all over the place.

And when a baby is born, what's not to like?

But as Jesus' public ministry takes off,

there's a different flavor to it all.

Jesus' beatitudes, as reported in Luke 6, is one of those places where

blessing and joy are found in the strangest, most unlikely of places.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you,

when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,

because great is your reward in heaven."

(Lk.6:20-22)

Rejoice on the basis of what has not yet happened.

Rejoice simply on the basis of what is promised.

But I can get that.

It's sort of like the joy children feel in the days leading up to Christmas.

It's the giddiness of anticipation.

Except these beatitudes point to a joy that is

not only waiting for the promise's fulfillment,

but waiting in the midst of suffering.

Sort of like waiting for Christmas

while someone is digging out your ingrown toenail... very slowly

New Testament joy is not dependent on external circumstances.

For instance, in Luke 8 Jesus sent out his followers, not just the 12,

but 72 people who had stuck close to him,

to heal the sick, cast out demons, and proclaim the coming kingdom.

They met with great success.

“The 72 returned with joy and said,
 ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’” (Lk.10:17)

But Jesus said,
 “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you,
 but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Lk.10:20)

Fruitful ministry is great,
 but your relationship with God is more important,
 and there are better things coming.
 With Jesus, the focus always stays on the relationship with God.
 Not on gifts, but on the Giver.

A few chapters later, Jesus told three parables in a row about lost things being found.

There was the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, also called the prodigal son.

And when each one was found there was joy and rejoicing.

Jesus said when the shepherd found his one lost sheep,

“He joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.
 Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says,
 ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’
 I tell you that in the same way,
 there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents
 than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

When the woman found her one lost coin,

“She calls her friends and neighbors together and says,
 ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’
 In the same way, I tell you,
 there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God
 over one sinner who repents.”

And finally, when the lost son came home,

his father threw a party, a big barbecue,
 sending out his servants to tell the neighbors,
 “Let’s have a feast and celebrate.
 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’
 So they began to celebrate.”

There were only two who were not excited about this homecoming.

The first one was the fatted calf, who became the barbecue.

The other was the older brother

who had stayed home,

kept his nose clean,

lived by all the rules,

and thought he deserved the party,

not his ne’er-do-well little brother.

(Lk.15)

And, of course, all three stories are about lost people coming home to God.

Joy and rejoicing once again focused on a relationship with God,

Not in material things,
 not a great harvest or landing the job,
 but in a relationship with God.

Not on gifts, but the Giver.

Toward the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry,

as he was entering Jerusalem, there was joy and rejoicing all along the parade route.

People were SO excited because Jesus was coming,
 God's messiah who would rescue them and bring God's kingdom into being.
 Shouting and singing,
 the red carpet treatment,
 and "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Lk.19:38)

Of course, there were some killjoys there, too.
 The Pharisees were upset that all these hopes pinned on Jesus
 might lead to social upheaval and even a revolt.
 And that would bring Roman soldiers down on them.
 They might also have been a little jealous of all the attention Jesus was getting.
 So they tried to hush up the crowd and stop the celebration.
 But that came to nothing.
 The joy and rejoicing went on.
 At least it went on for that day.

However, that day was not the end of the story.

This parade into Jerusalem started the week that ended in
 a bloody death on a cross, a hurried burial, and a silent Saturday.
 Strangely, the church chose to call that bloody Friday GOOD Friday.
 Because the focus is on God,
 on what God was doing through the cross,
 on what that day means for our relationship with God.
 Divine love poured out with nothing held back
 for the sake of others, for our sake,
 our sins paid for, the punishment taken, our debt paid,
 so we can be forgiven,
 the prodigal son or daughter brought back home,
 and reconciled with God.
 All for the sake of the relationship.

And so the church has always suggested the best reason for
 the joy of a celebratory parade on Palm Sunday is that
 from that point on in the Gospels,
 events hurry on toward Good Friday,
 toward the cross,
 toward God clearing the way for a restored relationship with him.

So the joy found in the New Testament,
 and for Christ-followers since then,
 is not dependent on
 having a great harvest or a prayer answered the way we want.

External circumstances are not the issue.

It's all about our relationship with God.

So even in the midst of difficulty and suffering,
 there can be joy.

For instance, the apostle Paul wrote the letter to the church in Philippi while behind bars.

He was sitting in a prison cell because of his ministry.

And yet, his letter to the Philippians is known as the letter of joy.

This short letter mentions the words joy and rejoicing time after time.

It is in Philippians that it says,

 "Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I say, Rejoice!" (Phlp.4:4)

It's not that Paul LIKED sitting in prison.

There were no comfortable beds or good food for him.
 But he says of his predicament,
 “I want you to know that what has happened to me
 has really served to advance the gospel.
 It has become clear throughout the palace guard and everyone else
 that I am in chains for Christ.
 Because of my chains,
 more of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to
 speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”
(Phlp.1:13-14)

God was using his imprisonment to spread the gospel.
 As he writes, he’s not sure what will be done with him.
 He could be held in prison, released, or even executed.
 His fate has not yet been determined.
 He wrote,
 “To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.
 If I go on living in the body,
 that means more fruitful labor in ministry for me.
 If I die, I go to be with Christ.
 Either way, I win!”
(Phlp.1:21-24)

What are you going to do with a guy like that?
 And everywhere in that letter there is joy and rejoicing.
 Written from behind bars.

Let me read a story Max Lucado wrote,

I drove the family to Grandma’s last night for Thanksgiving.
 Three hours into the six-hour trip, I realized that I was in a theology lab.
 A day with a car full of kids will teach you a lot about God.
 Transporting a family from one city to another is
 closely akin to God transporting us from our home to his.
 A journey is a journey, whether the destination be the Thanksgiving table or the heavenly one.
 Both demand patience, a good sense of direction,
 and a driver who knows that the feast at the end of the trip
 is worth the hassles in the midst of the trip.
 For me, six hours on the road is a small price to pay for my mom’s strawberry cake.
 I don’t mind the drive because I know the reward.
 As I drive, I can taste the turkey.
 Hear the dinner-table laughter.
 Smell the smoke from the fireplace.
 I can endure the journey because I know the destiny.
 For some of you, the journey has been long.
 Very long and stormy.
 In no way do I wish to minimize the difficulties that you have had to face along the way.
 Some of you have shouldered burdens that few of us could ever carry.
 You have bid farewell to life-long partners.
 You have been robbed of life-long dreams.
 You have been given bodies that can’t sustain your spirit.
 You have spouses who can’t tolerate your faith.
 You have bills that outnumber the paychecks and challenges that outweigh the strength.
 And you are tired.
 Let me encourage you with a parallel between your life’s journey
 and the one our family took last night.
 It’s worth it.

As I write, the Thanksgiving meal is over.
 My legs are propped up on the hearth.
 My tablet is on my lap.
 I have every intention of dozing off as soon as I finish this story.
 The turkey has been attacked.
 The giblet gravy has been gobbled.
 The table is clear.
 The kids are napping.
 And the family is content.

As we sat around the table today, no one spoke of the long trip to get here.
 No one mentioned the requests I didn't honor.
 No one grumbled about my foot being on the accelerator
 when their hearts were focused on the banana splits.
 No one complained about the late hour of arrival.

Yesterday's challenges were lost in today's joy.

God never said that the journey would be easy,
 but he did say that the arrival would be worthwhile.

Remember this:

God will get you home.

And the trials of the trip will be lost in the joys of the feast.

I would only add to Max's telling one thing:

Because we know the joy of the feast,
 most especially our relationship with God,
 we can have joy now, joy even in the midst of the trials.

And when we find that joy, we'll know the truth of the biblical statement,
 "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

(Ne.8:10)

What difference does it make that you're a Christian?

Joy.

On good days and on bad days.

Joy.

That's the difference.

Joy.

SERMON NOTES:

Scriptures cited: Lk.1-2; 6:20-22; 10:17, 20; 15; 19:28-40; Phlp.4:4; 1:13-14; Ne.8:10