

Scripture for Sunday, December 13th, “The Shepherds” (sermon below)

“For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his dwelling place. Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.” **1 Chronicles 16:26-28**

“...And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” — **Nehemiah 8:10**

“let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.” — **Psalms 5:11**

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is a fullness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. **Psalms 16:11**

“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” **Isaiah 55:12**

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.” **Habakkuk 3:17-19,**

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. **John 15:9-11**

“And may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him, until by the power of the Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope.” **Romans 15:13**

“Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” **1 Peter 1:8-9**

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” **Luke: 2 8-10**

You may recall that about a year ago I stood here introducing myself as the new Worship Ministry Team Leader. I mentioned how I told Pastor Rebecca that I would need some time to think about accepting the new role. Well... clearly I did not think long or hard enough because NOW look what she has me doing!

When Pastor Rebecca asked me if I would deliver the sermon today – being the smart women and wise teacher that she is – she told me the topic would be Joy and that she was sure I could find something to say about joy. I immediately fell into the trap! Of course I could talk about joy – everyone's experienced joy. Piece of cake!

And then it hit me – I had to say something MEANINGFUL about joy. I was about pick up the phone and call her back when I realized that I had also quoted from Paul's second letter to Timothy: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline." I knew then that I owed it to myself, to you and to God to take on this challenge. So here I am.

Joy! What **IS** joy?

Personally, I will never forget game 7 of the 2004 American League Championship Series when the Red Sox came back from a 0-3 deficit to beat the New York Yankees and win the ALCS. From there they went on to sweep the St Louis Cardinals and win the World Series ending the 86 year old Curse of the Bambino. Now that's JOY – in fact that feeling of joy carried me all through the following winter. For others it may be Feb. 5, 2017 and the New England Patriots' overtime win against the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl 51.

Of course there are much deeper kinds of joy: accomplishing something you worked hard for, a graduation, securing the ideal job, a good report, a new home, a special friendship, marriage, birth of children, the list is endless. Regardless of who you are, how old you are, your walk in life or your favorite sports team I am positive you have experienced joy in some form.

Let's pause a moment- what special moment of joy comes to your mind?

What exactly was it that made that moment so joyful? Was it:

- a feeling of accomplishment
- acquiring something you had always wanted
- an element of surprise
- a sense of relief
- Was it a personal moment or did it include others

Take another minute now and think again about that special moment. What exactly made that moment so joyful?

Aside from October 2004, I have been blessed with countless moments of joy, however, I've noticed that some of my earlier moments of joy seem to have been replaced by newer moments of joy. For example: the joy I felt surrounding the birth of my grandchildren seems to have surpassed that of having my own children.

So it makes me wonder:

- Do feelings of joy change as we go through life?
- Do our expectations of joy change?
- Can we create joy?
- Is there a strategy for achieving joy?

A while back, Pastor Rebecca asked all the members of TLT to develop an elevator speech explaining what our faith means to us. If you've never heard the term elevator speech – it's a concise but powerful narrative that can be delivered to someone in a short period of time such as the amount of time you might spend riding with a person in an elevator. (As an aside, I would suggest you all think about preparing one.) Since my elevator speech relates to what we are talking about this morning I thought I would share it with you now.

Simply put Jesus is my idol. No rock star, movie star or sports hero can even come close.

My faith is like a lighthouse – rock solid, steadfast and dependable. It guides every step I take and every decision I make. If I were to create a poster to advertise my faith – it would be a poster of the Christ child on Christmas morning. A thousand stars bursting with brilliance, adorning the place where a small, innocent, child lay resting with his mother. A choir of angels praising his birth, spreading the news of love and joy.

That image of the Christ child embodies all that I hold true about my faith – hope, peace, love and joy. That image is so powerful for me that I believe with all my heart that if every person alive had the ability and willingness to keep that image with them- in their hearts - then all despair, all hatred, and all evil would cease forever. And God would smile.

So you see.... I think joy really has nothing to do with what we have been talking about. I think Joy is all about that baby born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago.

Did you know that the English Standard version of the bible mentions the word joy 430 times while the word happy or happiness appears only 10 times? We heard some of those references earlier ...

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is a fullness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Webster would have us believe that joy is the emotion evoked by well- being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires. I beg to differ. True joy has nothing what-so-ever to do with that. Joy is not a feeling, it's not something we create and it's not the absence of sadness. Joy is a state of being.

Henri J.M. Nouwen, states it this way:

“Joy does not come from positive predictions about the state of the world. It does not depend on the ups and downs of the circumstances of our lives. Joy is based on the spiritual knowledge that, while the world in which we live is shrouded in darkness, God has overcome the world. Jesus says it loudly and clearly: “In the world you will have troubles, but rejoice, I have overcome the world”

Joy in this perspective is the fruit of hope. When I trust deeply that today God is truly with me and holds me safe in a divine embrace, guiding every one of my steps, I can let go of my anxious need to know how tomorrow will look, or what will happen next month or next year. I can be fully where I am and pay attention to the many signs of God's love within and around me.”

While my own faith has always been pretty solid, my places of worship have taken a more circuitous route. In my travels I had the good fortune to get to know Father Wallace, from St. Patrick's Church. In one of his Sunday morning sermons, he included a clever and powerful joke. I am not really very good at telling jokes because I usually forget the punch line. In this case, however— it's the details I've forgotten. I can recall the punch line vividly. His joke went something like this.....

For some reason (which I do not remember) there was this young man who found himself hanging on for dear life to a tree limb overhanging a deep abyss. He immediately starts screaming for help. "Help, Help, I need help, some body save me." Much to his surprise he receives an immediate response. A kind, gentle voice answers him saying "it's okay, I've got you, you can let go now." Relieved but somewhat skeptical the young man asks "Who is this?" The voice replies "It's God, I've got you, you can let go now." To which the young man responds "that's great – but do you have anyone else." Clearly that young man knows nothing about joy! If only he knew **“ let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.”**

My all-time favorite scripture reading is from the gospel of Luke. "In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them: and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. "

The shepherds can teach us a lot about Joy. At that time, shepherds were considered to be unskilled laborers on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. They worked tirelessly protecting their flocks from predators, locating the right water source, and securing sheep that had wandered off. Let's for a moment try to imagine what it must have been like for them that fateful night. Tired and weary at the end of a long day, the night sky is suddenly awash with great light and an angel of the Lord appears to them. Naturally they are frightened. They have no idea what is happening and why the angel has appeared before them. The angel allays their fears and delivers the message – I have come to bring you tidings of joy – Christ, the Savior has been born. They let go of their fears and decide to go immediately in search of the new born child. They gather up their sheep and head to Bethlehem. There they find Mary and Joseph and the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in the manger **just** as the angel had told them.

It's uncertain whether or not these particular shepherds had any knowledge of the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah. But even if they did – imagine being the first to hear the news! The first to see Jesus, the Son of God, King of Kings, the Prince of Peace. The long awaited Messiah had arrived, as foretold and right before their very eyes. They are overcome with awe and joy. They return to the fields spreading the good news, praising and glorifying God. That my friends..... is what Joy is all about.

Even though we were not there with those shepherds that night, we too can experience that joy. As Peter tells us, “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Let's go back to those questions I asked earlier

- Do feelings of joy change as we go through life? The answer to that is NO – the joy of knowing and accepting the love of God is always there for us. It never changes.
- Do our expectations of joy change? Again - NO – God's love for us is constant. We can expect joy to fill our hearts whenever we open them to God.
- Can we create joy? Most certainly NOT – it's God's love that creates Joy.
- Is there is a strategy for achieving joy? The answer is definitely Yes - it's as simple as:

Let go, open your heart and embrace the love of God.

Pastor Rebecca has taught us well to breathe in and breathe out. I'm going to ask you to do it just a tad differently. I want you to breathe out **first** then take a deep breath in. Try it a few times – exhale, then inhale deeply. Exhale - inhale. We are going to do that one more time. This time I want you to close your eyes and when you exhale, release all your fears, doubts and worries and when you inhale, let the Love of God fill you, wash over you and embrace you. Are you ready? exhale..... inhale.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

AMEN