
Lighting the Candle of Joy in Your Life



Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor
Sunday Sermon Dec 16, 2012
Scripture Passage Luke 2:8-14
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



We gather round a cake filled with lit candles and we sing Happy Birthday. As we go from one year in to the next we say **happy** New Year!

We will go to weddings and somewhere in the midst of the celebration we may be asked to stand and toast the bride and groom and our genuine wish for them will be for their happiness. We wish them all the happiness in the world.

When people are asked what they want for our children, they often reply that they don't really mind what they do so long as they are happy, so long as they are happy, that's all that matters.

So happiness is high on our wish list for people not only at the Christmas season, but through all year long. This treats happiness as though it was something we are climbing towards.

I looked happiness up in Google to get some definitions of how some people define **happiness**.

Aristotle: happiness belongs to the self-sufficient.

Another definition:

If you are a teenager, happiness is

knowing that the phone call is for you.

Or the unique humor of George Burns.

Happiness is a large close-knit family who live in another city.

Someone else: happiness is a choice. In life we choose our responses. Many motivational speakers would agree.

So we are told happiness is a choice and it is our choice. We can choose to be sad or happy. We can choose to be mad or glad. We can be better or we can be bitter, so today's motivational speakers preach to us. It is their gospel of motivation.

Several years ago, We moved into a small apartment in Victoria when we sold our home in Vancouver and the first day we were there, the dishwasher died. I like to think of myself as something of a fixer. It is a sign of personal defeat in my life when I have to call a service man into the house, but all my attempts to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation of the dishwasher failed. So we called someone in. Then the next week the fridge failed. Well it didn't really fail. It worked fine, except it kept everything warm which is

not what a fridge is supposed to do.

People who tell you that things cannot get any worse are liars! Things can always get worse. That same week in our church parking lot, someone scraped my car.

So I am told that I can choose my response. Well, to be honest, I chose not to be happy about all that.

But dishwashers, fridges, even floods are all fixable. We also live in a world of unwanted pain and unasked for cancer which comes like a silent intruder into a loved one and these things are not fixable. As I get to know you, I know that some of you are also facing some serious health issues and others are facing deep family struggles.

In these times we have to search for something that lies far far beyond happiness. We have to find an answer that is substantially different and much deeper than the motivational platitudes that are handed out like sayings you find in a fortune cookie.

But there is another word or quality that is even higher in the Bible and in the Christian experience. It is the little word **JOY**, but in fact it is one of the really big words of the Christian

faith. It only has three letters, but its meaning is huge.

The difference between happiness and joy may be subtle, but the distinction is critical.

All kinds of events and circumstances happen to us in life. We all know that. Some of them are large and others are small. Some are good and some not so good. Some are unwanted intruders into our lives. Many times we cannot choose what happens to us, but we are told, we can choose how we will respond and react.

That is certainly true. We may not have control over many of life's circumstances, but we do have control over our response and reactions.

In the midst of the struggles of life comes a different word from God, the word is **JOY!**

It comes through his messengers, the angels. It is not about being happy. It is far deeper and richer than that. It a message and a gift of joy. Angels are used in the Christmas narrative as God's courier company. They carry the message.

Luke 2

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

In one way or another, even although they may not recognize it, every human being is hungry for joy.

If happiness is a choice and comes to us by the way in which we choose to respond to some circumstance, then joy comes from something deeper. Joy is a gift from God.

C.S. Lewis: joy is the serious business of heaven.

But what might joy be? How would we describe it and even more important, how do we get it?

Here is what we need to grasp. Joy is the result of being able to connect the events and the experiences of life. What happens to us, to the purpose and the person of God.

Joy is the gift of God to us when we are to connect what is happening to us, usually outside of our control, to who God is and what God is doing.

When we remove God from all the events in life and live really like atheists, then the good events just become the happy and casual results of positive thinking, whereas the sad and tragic events become a bitter pill in which we have no choice but to swallow.

When we live in a godless world, we create our own heaven and hell.

But when all of life is linked to God, we are able to enter into joy. Joy comes from the willingness to connect events to God. Our obedience lies in our willingness to link events, especially those events which we cannot understand to the unknown purposes of God. Our faith calls on us to see events in the light of God's plans.

If joy is a gift, then it is a gift that comes from a choice and the choice is our obedience and willingness to link events to the person and the purposes of God.

Perhaps that's what Nehemiah discovered when he said, **the Joy of the Lord is my strength**, when he connected his life with its challenges and struggles to the reality of God. He was strengthened to face life with joy.

So you see the sporadic and transitory nature of happiness is dwarfed by the immense quality of joy. The shallow life span of happiness vanishes quickly like the morning fog. It is overcome by the depth of what real joy is all about.

Psalm 30

Weeping may remain for the night

But joy comes in the morning.

All of us know events and circumstances that will drive us both to tears and to our knees. We feel the coldness of the night overwhelm our hearts. The sun does not shine and our lives are eclipsed by the darkness of struggle.

It would deeper the pain even more to suggest that we can choose to be happy. That would be an insult, but if we can connect even these dark events to faith in God, then the darkness of the night within us can come to an end and we break forth into the light and warmth of the morning. Joy comes in the morning.

We thought that the night would never end. We thought that we were going to be its prisoners for the rest of our lives, but when we connect our lives to God, the morning can start to dawn within us and joy comes like the sunrise.

Joy does not necessarily change our problems, but it does change our perspective.

Sometimes life is hard. Life can even be unfair and we feel that some struggle is out to defeat us, whoever said things cannot get any worse was wrong!

The better question is, will we be crushed and defeated by this, will its darkness overwhelm us or will we connect our struggles to God?

There is nothing to be gained by suffering for the sake of suffering. That only makes us either callous or apathetic. Suffering and struggles always changes us, but it does not necessarily change us for the better. It only changes us for the better when we can connect it to the character and purposes of God.

James 1

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James is not suggesting that we rejoice at the news of cancer or some deep family struggle. At best that is superficial and phony. At worst it is dangerous and an impediment to finding real spiritual life and health.

But if we can ask, even with a timid voice, Dear God, what is the secret that lies hidden in this event, how can this be used to shape my life even a little more towards Christ, then we make tiny steps to enter into joy. Suffering alone does not produce perseverance. It is only suffering that is somehow endured in faith.

There is a list of Christian virtues that all Christians should know and aspire to. We call this list the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians

The fruit of the Spirit is love, **JOY**, peace...

We admire people who do not give up, perseverance, but the opposite of perseverance is stubbornness, not giving up. The difference lies in our quality of not giving up.

Joy cannot grow in the womb of bitterness and resentment. Enduring without God leads only to bitterness. Bitterness robs us of the possibility of joy. Bitterness makes us hard. Bitterness can fill us with revenge and people who are

bitter disqualify themselves as candidates of joy.

So Just as Mary offered God the warm sanctuary of her womb as a safe place for Jesus to be conceived and born, so joy needs a soft and willing heart, a safe place to be born and conceived within our souls. Because Joy is a command, joy needs the warmth of obedience. Jesus understood that.

Joy may not change the present. Instead joy asks us to focus on the future.

Hebrews 12:

Jesus the author and the perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

Without understanding and yielding to the character of His Father and trusting himself to the purposes of God, the pain of death never mind his death **for sin** would have been a crushing defeat, but when Jesus linked his death to the cosmic purposes of God, bringing salvation to the world, Jesus was able to look far beyond its pain and darkness. He was able to connect the cross to the purpose of God and so look ahead to joy.

I do not know what we are all working through this advent season. There is probably a mixture of good stuff and some not so good stuff. Some small stuff like broken dishwashers and annoying floods and some not so small stuff like health issues, cancer and family struggles.

When we watched this advent candle being lit, ask yourself, can I connect what I am facing right now to God, to his character and his purposes, perhaps in faith some purpose which you cannot see and cannot understand.

If you are merely enduring, hanging on and slowly becoming bitter, that will eat away at your heart and make you bitter, but can you connect in prayer your struggle to the purposes of God in your life, which you may not be able to see just now and then endurance and perseverance may begin to take on a different quality.

If you are struggling in the darkness of your soul, can you look ahead in faith and experience even the first shafts of morning light. Light a candle of joy in your heart.

When you start to connect your struggle to God, then joy quietly arrives on the scene. Light a candle of Joy in your heart today.

Jesus said to his disciples

11 I have told you all these things so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete

God wants us to be more than happy. He wants us to live in joy. This is why he sent his Son into the world and gave a bunch of ordinary shepherds a life-changing message to bring to the world, a message of joy.

This advent season, this morning. In fact this very moment, can you light a candle of Joy to confront some darkness in your heart, to address some pain in your life and this very moment, connect your life to God and the birth of His son Jesus.

If God is speaking to you about that, perhaps you need to connect some sadness you are experiencing to the joy of God or connect some darkness you are in to the light of God. Dear God, I want to connect what I am going through right now to who you are. I want to connect my life to your light and your love. I am asking for the joy of the Lord to come into my life and be my strength.