

2016_01_31 Annual | Sermon (Annual Letter)
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

Annual Pastor's Letter – January 2016

RESTORE TO US THE JOY OF SALVATION

Psalm 51

INI

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (Romans 15:13)

Psalm 51:10-12*

- 10 Create for me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me
- 11 Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And may You support me with a willing spirit

** translation by Professor John Pfeiffer*

Listen, O Israel, this is the Word of the Lord.

Dear fellow members of Ascension, brothers and sisters, redeemed, cleansed, and sanctified in Christ Jesus,

There are things in life that make us happy: a nice warm January day. And then there are things that make us really happy: a nice warm spring day. And then there is joy. Joy describes something deeper, something greater, something more lasting. An experience that surrounds us with something good. A good we can recognize, know, and actually participate in. That is why we call a birth a joyous occasion. That is why we call anniversaries, weddings, graduations joyous occasions. With each we participate in a situation that surrounds us with something good. And that is joy. Joy is the experience of sharing in a situation which surrounds us with something good. And so we rejoice in it together with others. We sing, we laugh, we are excited to be part of this experience. Have the circumstances changed? Are we no longer surrounded by it? Has it been lost?

Have you lost the joy? Maybe you remember it as a time gone past. You remember it as something that you once had known. You remember a hospital where you looked into the eyes of that new life, as you held him in your arms. You remember a wedding where you looked into the eyes of the one you were determined to spend the rest of your life with. You remember a graduation where you looked into the eyes of your mother as you walked down the aisle in that cap and gown, as you spotted her glowing smile. You remember it as a child in Sunday School, singing out with all your might: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart." You remember those situations where you were surrounded by something worth celebrating, a future full of possibilities. But that was then and this is now. You are grown and there is no time to sing such childish songs any more. It would be embarrassing. It would be unrealistic. Has the joy been lost?

I was wondering the same as I left a Toastmasters meeting last summer. Toastmasters is a club I visit where members work together on public speaking and communication skills. In this particular meeting, one of the members got up to give a speech on the topic: joy. She is one of these life coaches, a sort of motivational mentor for people who are going through difficult times or who are looking to improve themselves. Her topic was joy.

And she was bursting at the seams with it. She spoke of joy as something constantly present with each of us. Something that is always with her, that is at her disposal, that she can tap into whenever she needs, in a bad situation, when something painful comes her way. She called it a causeless joy, constantly within you in every situation. She was so filled with it that it was if at any moment she was going to burst at the seams and rainbow sprinkles would come showering down upon us.

And it made me wonder – what's wrong with me? I found myself constantly analyzing her. No one can be that happy. I know I'm not. I was determined to find out what was wrong with her, where she was faking it, how she really handles stressful situations. But what really disturbed me was why I wasn't feeling this way? After all I'm a Christian. I have the "joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart," right? I should be bursting at the seams. Paul says, "Rejoice always!" But I couldn't seem to tap into it, to know where to find it when I wanted it. Had I lost the joy?

It was that same time last summer, when I wondered the same thing about the congregation. There seemed like more reasons to be pessimistic rather than joyful. It was at this same time last year, that we were dealing with several losses in the congregation. The loss of several dear members. Long time members. We said good bye to long time member Marlys Johnson who transferred to Phoenix. We lost our dear

brother Chris Coutre a lifetime member, baptized into the faith here, raised, confirmed, married in this congregation; and we loss our sister Virginia Walsh someone eager to learn, filled with energy, excited about the gospel. We lost our sister Emma Libby, a child of this congregation who grew up going to Sunday School classes and was confirmed here. We lost the dedicated presence of Louise Coutre who died in June, a generations worth of Sunday School teaching and service to the Ladies group. These are painful losses. With the exception of Marlys, these losses were personal, emotional, sad experiences. And on top of that, we found ourselves struggling to pay the bills, maintain the property, fill the pews. I didn't feel much like celebrating. Have we lost the joy?

This is what David was wondering as he looked at the present situation in his life. He was wondering how all this could have happened to him? He was king of all Israel, ruling over God's people at a time when the kingdom was flourishing; he had riches, honor, he had found the woman of his dreams, a child on the way, what could bring him down? He figured he should have every reason to be happy, but something was missing.

He thought he would find taking what he wanted. As he stood on the roof porch of his palace, he saw her. She was bathing next door and she was beautiful. Her name was Bathsheba and David decided he wanted her for his wife. And so he took her. The problem was she was married. But this was no problem for a king. What he wanted, he got. So he devised a plan wherein he would have her husband Uriah killed. Uriah was a soldier and so David ordered that he be taken to the front lines and left there to die. And he took Bathsheba to be his wife and they conceived a child.

What could be more joyous than the expectation of a child? He had it all, yet he had lost everything. As the months passed by, he realized something was missing. A prophet came to him and showed him that this was sinful in the eyes of the Lord and that he would lose the child. David had indeed lost something. Something he could not get back. Something he could not find within himself. The happiness had fled as quick as it came and all that was left to do was to pray.

And so he prayed the words of our psalm,

- 10 Create for me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me
- 11 Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation

13 And may You support me with a willing spirit
 I will teach rebels Your ways,
 And sinful failures will turn back to You.

David had lost something and he wanted it back. But he knows he can't just conjure it up, he can't just wish it back into his life. He must pray for it. He prays for the joy to be restored. In other words, he prays for God to do something. To create, to renew, to preserve, to restore, to support. He prays for God to bring back to him a cleansed heart, the Holy Spirit, and the joy that had been lost in his sin and guilt.

So I looked at this word "joy" to find out how the Scriptures use this word. And as I did, I learned that the joy that David is praying for is never something to be found within us or within the things of this world.

In Isaiah chapter 22, God sends Isaiah to call the people to repentance for their unbelief, for forgetting about their maker. There we read, "In that day the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and for mourning. But instead, there was joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating meat and drinking wine, saying: 'Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.' Surely for this sin there will be no atonement for you, even to your death,' says the Lord God of hosts." (Isaiah 22:12-14).

This is the sort of joy and gladness that just does not last. But if there is no joy to be found in God, than that is all we have left. "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." Paul quotes this slogan in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 referring to the sad state of affairs if there is no resurrection of the dead. If there is no resurrection, no eternity for us, if there is no God for us, then there is nothing left but to eat and drink, to consume as much pleasure as we can before we die. It is a fleeting joy, something gone with the wind and complete separated from God's promise of the resurrection.

But Paul writes in Romans 14:17 that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking; rather the kingdom of God is the righteousness and peace and joy we have in the Holy Spirit." The joy for which David is praying cannot be found in us or in the things of this world. This joy is not something that can be conjured up by the power of positive thinking. It cannot be found in the things of this life or in the things of this world. It is a creation and gift of God that is accompanies God's saving work. And so we pray for our congregation, "Restore to us the joy of salvation."

The joy of the Holy Spirit is to be surrounded by God's saving work in Christ Jesus. It is to be surrounded by God's salvation and to participate in it by faith. We must look beyond what surrounds us outwardly. If we look to the outward

circumstances, we indeed will be frustrated, wondering what is wrong with us, with our ministry, without families. But if we instead turn our attention to this prayer, we will see that God is at hand, working, laboring for us, creating something new. A future full of possibilities. Then we see God answering David's prayer; cleansing David from his sins of murder, adultery, lying. Then we see God placing all those sins – yours and mine – on Jesus. That is what surrounds Jesus on the cross – a set of circumstances that truly brings about something good; while at the same time being surrounded by so much bad and so much pain.

That is the mystery of the Christian faith. That God, in the midst of so much bad, can bring about so much good. That is the mystery of the cross. Jesus is surrounded by the evil hatred of Satan, by the guilt of our sins, by the pain of hell, the sorrow of being separated from God, yet even in this he finds joy. So the writer to the Hebrews says, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

It was for the joy that was before him that he endured the cross. It was for the joy of knowing that this was for David, that this was for you, and that this would culminate in the resurrection. Jesus surrounded Himself with God's promises – the promise that this would save you from your sins, and the promise that God would restore all things in the resurrection. Those are the circumstances that surround him with joy. But only by faith.

So for us too. We look to a year ahead. And its hard work supporting a small congregation. There is a constant demand for help, for offerings, for prayers. We will be trying to figure out how to keep the property mowed and how to keep the facilities maintained. We will be trying to figure out how to fill church offices and how to find delegates for the convention. And on top of it all, we are taking on more outreach work. We are adding at least four new things to our list of outreach efforts. And there are struggles that each of us face at home. We have our own families and the struggles we face in our homes and in our own spiritual life. But for the joy that is set before us, we pray, we endure, and we are surrounded by Jesus.

Participating in this ministry is not a grudging obligation. It should never be a last resort, a last priority, a kind of, if I can get to it, if I have nothing else going on, if I have to. Whether you are mowing the lawn, helping out with Bread distribution, cleaning the church, donating your time to meetings and emails – this remains a ministry surrounded by the saving work of Christ; and this is our joy. And for the joy that is before us, we endure the cross, we share in the blessedness of a fellowship which teaches God's word, and which speaks the same thing.

Our joy is here, where Jesus is. Because here, like David, we are forgiven of our sins. So the best thing we can do is surround ourselves with it. When you are asked if you can help with this or that volunteer work: surround yourself with God's love. When you are feeling guilty and are afraid to come to church – surround yourself with likeminded believers and sinners like yourself and pray with David for God to restore the joy. When you are down and things don't seem to be going well for you – surround yourself with encouragement from God's word. When others are down and things are not going well for them – surround them with that same encouragement from God's word. And finally, let us surround our congregation with prayer – pray, pray, pray; pray for those members we have lost; pray for the efforts we put forth this year; pray for our fellowship to remain true to God's word; pray for us all and ask God to “restore to us the joy of salvation.”

So why can't we act like children? Can we be bursting at the seams with this news? We do have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts, we just need to see that Christ is surrounding us with it. We don't have to be embarrassed to sing it, to say it, to hear it, to pray for it, to lay hold of it. Remember it. Remember those moments that bring you joy: a birth, a graduation, a wedding, an anniversary – And even more so, remember the greatest event in your life: your baptism; for in that event, surrounded by water and promise, God has answered your prayer. He has restored to us the joy – the joy of knowing that God has washed us and is with us in the coming year and forever. Amen.