

Psalm 126
God's Gift of Joy

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Joy. Rejoicing. Shouts of joy. Laughter. Dancing. Delight. Joy is one of the many wonderful gifts from God and one of the certain experiences for the Christian disciple. Of course, the Christian disciple intimately knows suffering, sorrow, despair, agony, and hardship as well. But joy is also a definite promised experience for the disciple. Joy is part of the experience of Christian discipleship. Both suffering and joy were the experience of the Psalter and the experience of God's people throughout the Bible. Both joy and suffering have been the experience of the Christian disciple today. And, like God's people throughout the ages, we continue to hold firm to the hope and promise that joy is God's gift to us, as we experience God's presence and participate with God in His work on earth.

Joy and laughter are the experience of God's people in the Bible. Joy came to Israel when they were brought back from captivity, when they returned to Zion, when their long exile was over, when they were brought back to Jerusalem, the holy city of God's people. This is clear from the opening verses of Psalm 126. But we also know that joy is the experience of God's people from other stories in the Bible. Joy is the experience and response from God's people when they were delivered from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Exodus 15 records the song of joy and praise that was sung by all of Israel after they crossed the Red Sea. When the ark of the covenant came back to Jerusalem, God's people responded with joy and King David danced. When David was in hiding and was preparing to overtake King Saul's kingdom, David and his army were given food from their neighbours. Though exhausted, weary, discouraged, and defeated, David and the warriors rejoiced, the Bible says "there was joy in Israel".

Or consider stories in the New Testament. Joy is proclaimed to the shepherds: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people”. Joy comes to the people at Cana. In John 2, Jesus attended a wedding celebration. He was there with some of his family, friends, and members of the community. The hosts ran out of wine to serve the guests, a major social problem and embarrassment. Many of us know the story well: Jesus performed his first miracle and turned water into wine, the finest and choicest and best wine. You can imagine the sheer joy from the wedding hosts and guests. Joy defined the woman healed from bleeding. Joy defined the healing of the leper. Joy defined the paralytic man who was healed and could walk. Joy defined Paul the Apostle while he spent many nights in prison: cold, hungry, weary.

We know the Bible is full of human stories – stories of tragedy, sorrow, disappointment, hurt, betrayal, loss. But in these same stories we also hear stories of joy, unspeakable joy. *The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

We each have our own personal stories of joy as well. Every mother remembers well that moment of pure joy when she first heard her child’s cry. The nausea, hormonal changes, dietary tweaks, contractions, and immense labour pain throughout those 9 months are forgotten when a mother holds their newborn, a gift from God. We, as a church, experienced joy when we welcomed the Ahmet and Omar families to Whitehorse a couple of years ago. The wait felt long and much work was needed to help the refugee families get settled. Yet joy was the clear experience as we gathered at the airport to welcome them.

We read about joy in the Bible. We have witnessed and known joy ourselves. But what, exactly, is joy? Is it an emotion? Is it that feeling you get when you feel really good? Is it the feeling I get when I ride my mountain bike or play ultimate Frisbee? Or when I eat homemade chocolate chip cookies? Do we experience joy when everything is blissful, free of worry or pain or stress? There are many things which are pain-free and bring me happiness – experiences, people, objects. My happiness is dependent on external circumstances; it's dependent on what I *like*, on what I *enjoy*, on what *feels good*, on being *free from pain*. But joy is different.

Joy is not an emotion, not a feeling based on what makes us feel good. Joy is not dependent on my circumstances or what's around me. Joy does not require the absence of suffering or stress or pain. Joy is actually an important theological word. It is a religious concept. As a theological word, it is more about God than about our circumstance. As a religious concept, it is more about understanding the Christian faith than about understanding our feelings. Joy is primarily theological, not emotional or situational or social or physical. When we read about joy in the Bible, we find it connected with two things. This distinguishes joy from the emotion of happiness. Psalm 126 shows us how joy is a theological word, a religious concept.

First, joy is deeply connected to sacrifice, to suffering, to hardship. We notice this connection in the Psalm in two ways. To fully appreciate Psalm 126, we need to understand a little bit about Israel's history. Israel was God's people. Israel knew and experienced their identity as God's people in a few ways: through circumcision, through observing the Torah or the law, through receiving the promised land, and through the presence of God in the Temple in Jerusalem. All of these gave Israel identity, meaning, purpose. It was through these physical symbols that Israel

self-identified as God's people. There came a point in Israel's history where Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians, the Temple was destroyed, and the people removed from their land and sent into exile. When that happened, Israel lost what it meant to be God's people: their land was gone, the Temple was gone, and they were under the rule of a foreign nation. So faced with enormous social, political, economical, cultural and religious questions of identity, for over 70 years, God's people were without the defining markers of their identity. They were lost, confused, and suffering.

This Psalm was written by the Psalmist who bore the scars, the wounds, the memories, the fears, the unrealized hopes, the confusion that comes when your known world is replaced by something foreign, strange, oppressive, and ugly. This Psalm – a song full of hope - was written by someone who had suffered through the captivity of Israel. This Psalm – a song of joy - was written by someone who had endured great sacrifice, trial, suffering. This Psalm - a song of promise - was written by someone who had felt despair, sorrow, grief.

Secondly, we notice suffering as the background of joy in verses 4 through 6. When the Psalmist refers to the Negev, we develop a picture of an extremely dry and arid place. Life is hard to come by there: plants and vegetation are few because lack of water cannot support growth. It is a desert-like place whose existence is defined by hardship, sacrifice, and suffering. It is a barren wasteland. The Psalmist declares that joy comes to these places. In the next verse, the Psalmist invites us into the image of a farmer. The image the Psalmist describes is also one of hardship, sacrifice, suffering, and challenge. My grandfather was a farmer and one my memories of him are his hands: the creases were always stained brown, when I hugged him, he always smelled

like earth. When he picked me up and carried me, his calloused and rough hands held me with tenderness and love. Years of labour, sweat, toil, and blood were embedded in those strong hands. The life of the farmer is not easy, it is full of sacrifice, suffering, and hardship. The life of the farmer is full of tears and weeping.

All throughout this Psalm, we cannot escape the image of suffering and sacrifice: captivity, exile, arid places, tears, weeping.

So the first theological word, the first religious concept in joy is sacrifice. That is why the first word in our worship service this morning was to sing “We Bring our Sacrifices of Praise”. We sang:

We bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord.

We bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord.

And we offer up to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving;

And we offer up to you the sacrifice of joy.

The second theological word, the second religious concept of joy is God’s presence. The Psalm is not simply a recitation of events, it is not a biography, it is not a history book. These were the songs that were sung by the pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual feasts and festivals. The march to Jerusalem was long, difficult, full of dangers and distractions. The Psalm, like all the songs of ascent, was a song that was sung to remind the people who they were and where they were going. It was a song that was sung to identify them as the people of God

and to emphasize their journey to God. And to remember who they were, it meant singing about God. So this Psalm is a song of praise, it is a testimony of God's acts, provision, work.

The focus of the Psalm is found in the centre of the Psalm, verse 3: "*The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced*". Before this verse, the Psalmist writes in the past tense. After verse 3, the Psalmist writes in the future tense. Present rejoicing is connected both to the past and to the future. And what we notice from verses 1 and 2 is that our present joy is connected to God's actions in the past. "*When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them'*".

You see, the Psalmist knows that joy is a gift from God that comes to us through God's presence, through his work, through his actions. The Psalmist can rejoice in the present because of God's past actions in history; because of what God has done. In the Old Testament, the person who was in mourning or in lament was not able to participate in public joy and was not permitted access to the Temple – God's dwelling place. In the Old Testament, there was a visual reminder that death and mourning were about the absence of God. Joy and life were about the presence of God.

So joy is the reality of the disciple of Jesus: because joy is experienced through God's presence and past acts. Joy is a theological word because it is about what God has done, not about what's happening in our circumstances or situation. Joy is a religious concept because it is about what God is doing, not about how I feel. So if joy is our response to God's actions on earth, then the

normal reaction to being joyful is to sing: we are in the presence of God so we praise the One who has given us joy.

So we see that joy is a gift from God which we can experience in times of suffering and sacrifice through His presence with us, through His being with us, through His actions.

How do we, today, in Whitehorse, in 2018, experience God's gift of joy?

Well, we know the recurring pattern in the Bible: joy is born out of sacrifice and suffering.

From exile to joy. From suffering to joy. From embarrassment to joy. From defeat to joy. From sickness to joy. From mourning to joy. From sacrifice to joy. This is the shared experience of the disciple of Jesus. This is our experience.

Joy does not happen when we try to eliminate, escape, destroy, or ignore all that hurts us.

Nowhere in the Psalm does the Psalmist advocate removing suffering or hardship or pain.

Nowhere does the Psalmist try and run away from difficulty. Instead, joy happens to us precisely in those experiences of hurt, sorrow, suffering, sacrifice. Why? Because joy comes to us when God is present and we are joining in God's work on earth.

You see God's presence is known, seen, heard, and felt through the work of God on earth. God's work redeems, restores, renews, heals, saves, forgives. God's work is about justice, peace, righteousness. God's work brings light where there is darkness, brings freedom where there is oppression, brings wholeness where there is brokenness. God's work is positioned so firmly and

decisively in places of sacrifice, suffering, pain, and challenge that we cannot participate in the work of God without also experiencing sacrifice, suffering, and pain.

Joy is our experience when we join in God's work. We experience joy when we serve at the Centre of Hope. We experience joy when we genuinely welcome our neighbour to our table. We experience joy when we care for the sick, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan. We experience joy when we play with playdough with the toddlers in the nursery. We experience joy when we pray with the teenager trying to navigate cultural expectations and Biblical teaching. We experience joy when we listen and show compassion to our colleague. We experience joy as we sit with someone in the hospital and listen to their stories of God's work in their life. The circumstances are not always happy – there is poverty, homelessness, sickness, distress, angst, uncertainty, loss. But we have joy because we know God is present and at work and we are joining in his work to bring compassion, grace, love, mercy, and hope.

So we experience the gift of God's joy today, in Whitehorse, in 2018, whenever we are joining in God's work here at Riverdale Baptist Church and in our community and in our world.

This gift of joy comes to us because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. Joy happens as a result, a consequence of our following in the ways of Jesus. You and I don't need to first be joyful and then become a disciple of Jesus Christ. You and I don't need to first rejoice before we come to worship. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that joy is a pre-requisite for being a disciple of Jesus. Nowhere does this Psalm indicate that we must have joy before we come to God. Nowhere does

this Psalm even hint that we must be continually joyful, ever rejoicing, always full of joy when we are on the path of discipleship.

It is commonly believed that the absence of joy means someone is no longer a Christian. It is often understood that to not be rejoicing means someone has stopped being a disciple of Jesus Christ. But this Psalm does not say that we need joy to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This Psalm says that we experience joy because we are a disciple of Jesus Christ. We don't start with joy then choose Jesus. We are chosen by God and given the gift of joy from God as we journey through discipleship. The only requirement to discipleship is our repentance, our turning to God and believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Lord and Saviour, and choosing to obey and serve and love Jesus.

In this series studying the Songs of Ascent, we have been learning who God is. We are also learning about what happens to us on the path of discipleship. We have learned that in our decision to turn away from the lies of the world, instead turning to God, we receive the gift of peace. We have learned that we receive the gift of God's protection from evil that threatens to separate us from the love of God. We have learned that we receive the gift of unity when we worship. We have learned that we receive the gift of mercy when we look up to God. We have learned that we receive the gift of God's help in the face of monsters, raging waters, and predators threatening to take away our faith, hope, and love. We have learned that we receive the gift of security. And now we receive the gift of joy. The path of discipleship is full of God's good gifts to us, His people. These gifts don't happen before we are disciples; these gifts come to us as a result of being a disciple.

There come moments in the pilgrim's walk, in the Christian disciple's journey where we look down the path and see only darkness and shadows and defeat. There are times when we are suffering, when we are enduring hardship and challenge and we know not what to do. During our moments of being captive, we sing this Psalm to remind us of what God has done, and can do again. We sing this song to remind us that joy comes to us in our suffering and in the presence of God. We sing this song to proclaim our confidence that God has acted in the past, given his people joy, and that although we are still facing struggle, we are confident we will have joy.

We are like the farmer in the Psalm. The farmer carries their bag of seeds, moving slowly, sadly, methodically, purposefully over the land. On this land, the farmer walks with intent, with tears, with sorrow, with weeping. The farmer moves with sadness and hope, with sorrow and desire. But the farmer does not move alone. No, the farmer wanders through his land accompanied by the living God. And the farmer knows he will return once again to this land – the land that has known his tears, sweat, blood, agony. And when the farmer returns, there will no longer be weeping but there will be rejoicing. There will be joy.

We may not toil in the fields but we labour in tears in other ways. The parent knows this same kind of work, work that is frustrating, demanding, exhausting, and overwhelming. The student knows the tears of failure, the bitterness of rejection, the agony of defeat. The unemployed has cried a thousand tears in search of meaning and purpose. The widow's work increases.

Through our work, as parent, as student, as unemployed, as widow, we hold on to the sure hope for joy. After all, joy has a past, a history, a date, a story, a memory, a known and lived experience of participating in God's work on earth. We are a people who gather each week to worship the Triune God. We are a people who tell each other of God's acts in history. We are a people who hold on to hope of God's promises in the future. And we are a people who are able to firmly say "*The Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced*".

Joy is past. Joy is present. And, ultimately, joy is future. After all, if God's gift of joy came to the people of Israel, came to the early disciples, came to the saints who have gone before us, joy will certainly define God's future work in the life of the disciple.

Joy does not deny sorrow. Joy does not ignore suffering. Joy does not pretend pain does not exist. Joy pushes its way into the deepest darkness, the cruelest catastrophe and brings laughter, songs, praise, redemption. Joy is the theological word that proclaims God's presence is here and He will once again do good things. Joy is the decision of hope, of promise.

So we look to the past and remember the great acts of God. Our deepest source of joy is to look upon the cross. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save, redeem, renew, and restore the world. Through his life and ministry, Jesus taught us what God's Kingdom is all about: peace, righteousness, and love. Jesus Christ died on the cross, bearing the weight of all sin so that we might be reconciled with God the Father. On the cross, our sins are forgiven, our wounds are healed and we are made whole and free and new. Jesus was resurrected and ascended into Heaven. By grace through faith, we receive the gift of eternal life. We are a people who are

redeemed, restored, renewed, and saved. This – God’s past act in history on the cross and empty tomb – remains our source of joy today.

Amen.