

Welcome the Seasons

Days of Joy

Luke 2:8-11

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There is a Disney movie that came out in 2015 entitled *"Inside Out"*. This is an animated film about emotions and feelings. It focuses on a young girl named Riley, who is struggling with some of her emotions, especially joy.

During this season we are surrounded by the image of "Joy." We sing it, we hear it, we write it, and we read it. Let's take a look at the reading for today, from Luke chapter 2, verses 8-11.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!"

There it is "good news that will bring great joy." For many of us, this time of year brings such joy. There are friends and family to gather with, there are parties to attend, gifts to wrap and open, homes to decorate. You want to talk about joy, I will be spending Christmas with my first grandchild this year. The joy is overflowing! There are great memories of the past and new joys to be lived out this time of year for many ... but not for everyone. Here's the thing, what if you aren't feeling the joy? What if joy is the last thing you are feeling right now? It can seem as though you are expected to feel joy this time of year. But the feelings happening inside of you are anything but joy.

Maybe you find yourself feeling something like Riley felt in the film, *Inside Out*. In the movie, Riley has her world turned upside down. Life as she knew it completely changes when her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco. Her life is suddenly turned upside down. And her "joy" was nowhere to be found. Many of us can relate to Riley. When our world gets

turned upside down joy can seem to disappear. In the Christmas story, Mary, the mother of Jesus gets her world turned upside down!

Imagine Mary, being engaged to Joseph, then she finds out she is pregnant. Talk about getting your world turned upside down! She must have experienced all kinds of emotions! We know that she experienced joy, as was written in Luke 1. But she also may have felt fear, maybe even sadness. Think about it, her life with Joseph was in jeopardy. What was going to happen? How was she going to explain this, and what were people going to say? The life she had planned with Joseph was going to look completely different! Her world was getting turned upside down.

Mary's world would never be the same, and yet somehow she was full of joy. Where did this joy come from? The Holy Spirit. The joy that Mary received and that you and I have been given is never based on our life circumstances. This joy is all about knowing that God, the Holy Spirit, is present with us all the time! That joy came to Mary, and that is our joy as well. It is the presence of God that was within her and within each of us that brings us joy. As we heard earlier from the gospel of Luke, *I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people*. And that great joy comes from the Holy Spirit, God's presence within you and me.

This joy is different than what we experience when we are happy. This joy is dependent on who Jesus is and God's presence in us as the Holy Spirit, and it is accessible to us even in the worst of times, when our world is turned upside down. And this joy, well, it can never be taken from us.

It is important to remember that this joy doesn't minimize the pain and suffering that we feel, maybe even today. Life can be hard and that sometimes it might feel like there is no room for joy, especially during this season. Some years the holidays are just plain hard. I don't believe Jesus has called us to be all smiles and happy when you are not feeling it. That is not what our scripture means when it speaks about joy. Joy is the promise of Jesus. Mary experienced some difficult times. God's promise to Mary is the same promise for you and me: that even in the hardest, darkest, and most chaotic times of our lives, God is with you, never leaving your side and will get you through the darkest nights and the grief you bear.

We need a joy that we can hold onto no matter what the circumstances in our lives are, a joy that is always accessible to us. That joy is found in the Christ child, Jesus. This is the gift of Christmas.

During Advent, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while in a Nazi prison, had written a letter to some of his friends and former students. Part of it read, as follows:

The joy of God goes through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it.

God is in those very places from which we want to turn away, our sadness, our loneliness, our despair, and meets us there. Just like he did for Mary. And that is good news. In the movie *Inside Out* we are reminded to give ourselves permission to not be “okay,” maybe we are sad, maybe this is a tough time of the year. Jesus walks with us as we find ourselves trying to avoid uncomfortable feelings and gives us the strength to go towards them, to lean into the promise that he is right there, within us and will never let us go.

Here are some practical ways we can live into the joy of Jesus.

1) Reading and studying scripture gives us the encouragement and hope that no matter what our circumstances may be. We read story after story in our Bible about God’s constant presence in every circumstance. Even when those who were struggling couldn’t feel it. As they look back it was God that got them through. God walked along side our ancestors and will always be present with you.

2) Worship is another spiritual practice that stirs up joy. I am reminded of the presence of Jesus when I am in worship. Quite often the songs we sing bring tears to my eyes, and stirs in me a joy that brings me peace and hope.

3) Awareness – Sometimes we feel our life is so complicated and full that we often find ourselves out of touch with the present. When we take time to be aware of God’s presence joy comes to us through just being. God is present within us as we walk, talk, laugh and cry, God is present within us when we gather with friends and family and when we are alone.

God is within us at all times. That is the hope, the peace, the love and the joy of Christmas. God came to us in Jesus so that we would know that God dwells within us. When we are aware of God’s presence we are in a holy place, a place where joy abounds.

Eugene Peterson says, “Joy is what we experience when God takes over our lives. The experience of joy is derivative. It doesn’t come from us; it comes to us. It isn’t something we do; it is something God does.”

How will you live into the joy of the Lord today?

Let us pray. God, you have filled us to overflowing with your Holy Spirit. May that joy penetrate our hearts so that we can share it with others. We pray for opportunities to Go and Tell everyone about you! Amen.