

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Walking in Joy
Rev. Dr. John Judson
December 12, 2021

1 Samuel 1:21-28; Luke 1:39-45

It is always nice in life to know that there are some things you can always depend upon. For me one of those is our own Detroit Lions. We can always depend on them to find a way to lose. I say that because this season they have lost three times on the final play of the game...and this last week appeared to be no different. Leading late in the fourth quarter, deep in their own territory, rather than punt the ball, they decided to go for a first down on fourth and one. Needless to say, as only the Lions can do, not only did they not make the first down, but they fumbled the ball closer to the end zone. Their opponents quickly drove into the endzone, took the lead, and people were headed toward the exits. But then, a true Christmas miracle occurred. With less than two minutes to go, the Lions drove down the field and closed in on the end zone. Finally, there was time for one last play. Our quarterback stepped back in the pocket and drilled the ball to one of his receivers for a touchdown. In that moment it was as if cork had been shot out of shaken champagne bottle. There was an explosion of joy. One player was running off the field with his finger raised...as if to say we are number one...even though I suppose it stood for one victory. That, my friends, is what joy looks like.

Joy is one of those words we often throw around without thinking about it. We talk about being filled with joy; or perhaps say we are joyful; or maybe say we enjoy something. But what is joy? First, joy is not happiness. Happiness is a state of being. It is a sense of contentment with life. Joy, on the other hand, is a moment, an event. Joy is something that often takes us by surprise. Joy is a moment of transcendent delight. It was the joy on our grandson's face when he was splashing in the tub and suddenly his yellow rubber ducky got dunked and then popped back to the surface. It was the Lions transcendent delight in their first victory. The strange thing about joy though, is that these moments of transcendent delight diminish as we get older. It is easy to lose sight of joy when we remember what happened at Oxford High School, or the tornadoes this past week, or now two years of Covid pain. Joy escapes us. Yet, if we listen to the scriptures, joy is something that God wants us to have even in the most difficult of times. Joy is a gift that God gives us through the Spirit. So this morning we are going to go looking for joy.

We begin our exploration by acknowledging that there are two kinds of joy. There is giving joy and there is receiving joy. Giving joy is what Hannah experienced. On the surface, there would appear to be little or no joy in what takes place in our morning's story. Hannah, as you heard last week, prayed desperately to God for a male child. If she has a male child, she promises God that her son would serve God as a priest in training. Hannah conceives, gives birth, weans her son, and then brings him to the tent of meeting in order to lend him to God. For any parent this would hardly seem like a moment of joy. Yet for Hannah it is. I say this, first, because she brings a bull for a sacrifice; and when a bull is sacrificed the bull is not just consumed by fire, but most of it becomes a barbeque for a family celebration. I say this is a moment of joy because Hannah is going to sing a song of praise to God...which we will look at next

week. For Hannah this is a moment of joy because she gets to give back to God a gift that has been given to her; a gift that fulfilled her deepest desire. There is joy in the giving...even if there is sadness in the parting.

Our second story is a story of joy in receiving. As Rev. Bethany talked about last week, Mary was given the opportunity to be the mother of the messiah. God considered her worthy of the task. So, Mary, probably a bit afraid of society's reaction to her as an unwed mother, goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy and Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit. This causes her to cry out, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Can you hear the joy in her voice? Can you hear that this is a moment of transcendent delight? This is pure, unexpected joy that comes to Elizabeth because God has given her an opportunity to share in the amazing, world-changing event that is going to be Mary's son. This is pure, unexpected joy because it says God has fulfilled God's promise. This is pure, unexpected joy because Elizabeth now knows that God has not forgotten God's people. There is joy in receiving.

As I said a moment ago, the older we get, the less joy we seem to find in life. It is as if we close ourselves off to the possibility that joy is out there waiting for us. Yet joy is there for the experiencing. Giving joy is possible. I say this because I have seen this in the last couple of weeks. I have been fortunate enough to watch many of you bring in your gifts for the angel tree. And what I saw on many of your faces was transcendent delight. There was a lightness in your steps. There were smiles on your faces. My friends, this kind of giving is a moment to experience the joy of giving, not out of obligation, or guilt, but simply out of a joyous response to what God has given to us. Receiving joy is possible...if we are open to it. The unexpected joy of a beautiful sunrise or sunset; the unexpected joy of a word of thanks that surprises us; the unexpected joy of seeing someone you didn't expect to see, or perhaps making a new friend; the unexpected joy of experiencing God's love and grace in a new way. All of these ways of giving and receiving joy are why we can talk about walking in joy...because there are moments of joy waiting for each of us if we are only willing to see them, to be open to them.

I know that we are living in a moment when it is easy to look at the world and see nothing but bad news; Covid, gun violence, inflation, political gridlock...and on and on. Yet we can never let those realities keep us from finding joy; keep us from experiencing the joy that comes to us in the love of God in Jesus Christ; or the joy that comes when we can share with others what we have been given. So, my friends, my challenge to you is this: ask yourselves, how am I allowing myself to be open to joy...the joy God desires for me?