

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Don't Be Afraid to Practice Joy
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Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 2:1-14

I'm not sure any of you have ever experienced this but let me ask you if this sounds familiar. You are calling a support line to get some help with your electronic device, or you are calling a retailer to make a purchase, or perhaps a clinic to make an appointment. You click through all of the numbers to get to the correct person...and then you are put on hold. If you are fortunate there may be some music and an occasional electronic voice that comes on and says, hold times are longer than normal but that you are a valued customer. Other times there is nothing but silence. You occasionally look at your phone to make sure that you are still connected. As time goes by you begin to wonder if they have forgotten about you altogether. Then it happens. Instead of the music and the electronic voice or silence, you hear it, the beep, beep, beep of having been hung up on. And then you know that they have forgotten you.

Being forgotten is not only one of the great annoyances of being human, it is also one of the great fears. I would guess that since the dawn of human consciousness, since the dawn of human beings having a sense of self, we have feared being forgotten. We have feared it because to be forgotten is the equivalent of never having existed at all. This is why people build monuments to themselves, draw on cave walls, write "Kilroy was here" and all the other ways we try and remind people that we once existed. This is the reason for the ancient Israelite practice of Levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was the practice of a childless widow marrying her husband's closest male relative in order to have children in her deceased husband's name. This was done as the Torah says, so that the husband's name might not be "blotted out of Israel," meaning so that he will not be forgotten and in essence, never existed. To be forgotten then is a frightening, depressing thought as well as one of humanity's greatest fears.

I offer you that thought because being forgotten is at the heart of both of our stories this morning. In each story, the people of Israel believed that they have been forgotten...forgotten by God. The people addressed by Isaiah believe that God has forgotten them because they are on the verge of annihilation. The mighty Assyrian Empire was on the move. The Empire had utterly destroyed the northern branch of the Israelite people, the kingdom of Israel. Those who had not been killed had been deported, never to be heard from again. Now the Assyrians had set their sights on the Southern branch of the people of Israel, the nation of Judah and its capital Jerusalem, with the intent to destroy them as well. There appeared to be no hope of survival and God had forgotten them. Similarly, the shepherds would have had the same feeling. They lived under the thumb of a foreign power who could order them to travel in order to be counted and taxed, steal their land, build temples to foreign gods and slowly but surely absorb them into the Greco-Roman culture. It was as if God had forgotten God's own children again...and soon it would be as if they never existed at all.

Into these two moments though came a sign from God; a sign of a child, who not only brought hope as we talked about two weeks ago, but who brought joy. What I want to do is pause from our two stories for a moment and talk about joy. For many of us joy is a feeling of elation, ecstasy, happiness or pleasure. It might be a word we would use to describe how it feels when the Lions actually win, rather than lose a game in the fourth quarter. But what I want to offer is that Biblically speaking, joy is different from all these other emotions. All these other emotions are a temporary phenomenon. We can be happy one moment and sad the next. We can feel pleasure one moment and pain the next. We can move from elation

to depression in the blink of an eye. Biblical joy is different because it is not a momentary emotion. Joy is a state of being. Joy is a state of being that is caused by the realization that we have not been forgotten by God. Instead we are remembered, we are loved, and we are valuable. Let me say that again. Joy is a state of being that is caused by the realization that God has not forgotten us, but instead we are remembered, we are loved and we are valued. These three attributes that bring about joy, being remembered, loved and valued are central to the entire Biblical story. They are central to God's mighty actions across time in which God desires the restoration of God's people in order that through God's people, all of creation is blessed. Story after story reminds us that God remembers God's people wherever they are and whatever they have done. Joy then is to be the bedrock of our lives as God's followers. Joy is to be a constant in all the equations of life.

We can see how this works in both of our stories. As I said a moment ago, the stories are set in times when people's joy was at low ebb because they believed that they had been forgotten. But then comes the sign of the child. *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* The sign is of a child being born into the royal family who will save the people from extinction and will bring them back into a time of peace and prosperity. This sign is a reminder that Judah has not been forgotten, but is remembered, loved and valued. It was a moment in which joy was renewed. The same can be said for the sign that came to the shepherds. *"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."* For those shepherds this was a sign that God had not forgotten them; that God had not forgotten God's people; that God had not forgotten God's recreative plans for the world. God remembered them, loved them and valued them. This was good news of great joy.

In many ways joy is what this season of the church year is all about. Though we often think about Advent as the run-up to Christmas, it is intended to be a season of joy because it celebrates the coming of Jesus into the world, thus reminding us over and over again that we are not forgotten, but that we are remembered, loved and valued. I realize that this may be difficult for us to believe in the midst of the pandemic when we are isolated, worried and wary of others because of our appropriate fear of catching COVID-19; when we have friends and family members who have contracted the virus; when we have lost jobs because of it. In these moments it becomes harder and harder to hold onto happiness; to feel ecstatic about anything. Therefore, joy matters. It matters because joy is a state of mind that God offers us through God's ongoing presence with us in and through Jesus and the Spirit. It matters because joy can lift us even in moments of sadness and despair. It can lift us when nothing else can. This week I would like us to practice joy. And here is how, close your eyes and repeat after me. "I have not been forgotten. I am remembered. I am loved. I am valued." Then repeat these phrases every morning and evening and in so doing, experience the joy of Advent; the joy of being remembered by God.