

Remnant Life Church  
December 15, 2024  
**At the Heart of Christmas is Joy**  
Third Sunday of Advent  
Philippians 4:4-7

Can you feel it?

- The Big Day is less than 10 days away
  - For some it is a day of great expectation
  - For others it is a day to be survived and moved beyond
  - And there are always many reasons for both sides of those feelings
- But for each of us, regardless of what side of the line you fall on, it is a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus
  - Houses decorated
    - Some are spectacular
    - Others very garish
    - And, I must admit, some are confusing
    - Because of course, nothing says Christmas or commemorates more beautifully the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ than an inflatable white unicorn!
- But what is truly at the heart of Christmas?
  - We are looking at four important elements this Advent season that should be at the heart of this time of year
    - The first was hope
    - The second was peace
  - And today, the third element at the heart of Christmas is joy

Christmas has been called the season of Joy

- We are told that it is a time when joy has come
- We sing joy to the world!
- And we have lit the candle of joy

And yet still the question might remain – what is joy?

- Well, that is not as easy to answer as it may first seem
  - Primarily because many different things can bring joy into our lives
  - What brings joy to you is likely not the same as it is for me
- Of course, there is no shortage of those who want to help you determine what brings you joy
  - I have seen many commercials that tell me they know what will bring me joy
  - Apparently, a shiny new car with a big red bow on the roof is one of them
  - I have been told that my wife will be filled with joy if there is jewelry with lots of diamonds under the tree
  - Certainly, a new set of championship-quality golf clubs would do the trick
- But those are all very temporary items to be connected with something so important as our joy
  - After all, a new car becomes an old car
  - A diamond gets dirty and can become dated in its design

- And no matter how expensive they may be, new clubs are not going to fix the slice that has my drive ending up on the wrong fairway!
  - There are several here this morning that can personally attest to the truth of that
- Certainly what is more important for us to understand this morning is what does the Bible say about joy?
  - It actually has a great deal to say
  - The words joy, joyous, and joyful appear over 270 in the NIV Bible

**READ – Phil 4:4-7**

Now, that is likely not the passage of scripture you were expecting

- But Paul’s message to the church in Philippi is perhaps one of the very best definitions and examples of what joy is in the entire Bible
  - He begins by saying, *Rejoice in the Lord always...*
  - Then, he repeats himself as if to say, in case you missed that...rejoice!
    - Then he goes on with don’t let anxiety be a part of your life
    - And then give thanks to God for everything
    - Because he continues, the peace that God gives is something you will not be able to understand
    - And it will all keep you focused on Him
- Now, if you have read any of Paul’s writings, you know that this is not an uncommon theme
  - While the book of Philippians is known as the NT Letter of Joy, he said these same things, in different ways, in virtually all of his letters
    - So, what makes this noteworthy?
    - Why point this out when talking about joy?
- Because it is less about what he wrote and more about what was happening in his life when he wrote it that defines joy
  - You see, at the time of his writing this letter, he is sitting in a Roman prison
  - It is near the end of his life, and he knows his time is growing short
    - But rather than being consumed with his circumstances, he is focusing on God
    - Rather than talking or writing only about his problems, he is encouraging the reader to be joyful and give thanks to God
- Joy is not easy to define
  - Here is what Webster says – *Joy is the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires*
  - My first response is that is as worldly a definition as you can get!
  - And besides that it isn’t particularly helpful
    - That definition centers on what is happening
      - And it obviously focuses completely on self
    - And so the question remains, what is joy?!
  - It is elusive when only viewing it from the world’s perspective
    - But we have a different view, a different perspective

- And that perspective is also demonstrated in the most familiar of passages for this time of year
- I did not have Rod read it this morning because you will hear the full account next Sunday evening at our Christmas service
  - But it involves a group of guys who likely did not share a great deal of joy
  - And much of the reason for that was because of what they did and who they were – I am, of course, speaking of the shepherds
- We read in Luke’s second chapter that the shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks by night
  - Here is how that literally translates
    - These guys are out in the middle of nowhere
    - They are dealing with passive but not very bright animals
    - And it's about 2:30 in the morning
    - Is it any wonder that one of the first things the angel said to them was to cheer up?
- Let me tell you a little bit about shepherds in the NT
  - Shepherds were near the bottom of the social ladder.
  - They were uneducated and unskilled, increasingly viewed in the post-New Testament era as dishonest, unreliable, unsavory characters, so much so that they were not allowed to testify in court.
    - The only ones considered lower than them were the lepers
    - And they were shunned and avoided with nearly the same measure of disdain
  - Because sheep require care seven days a week, shepherds were unable to fully comply with the man-made Sabbath regulations developed by the Pharisees.
    - Things like not doing any work on the Sabbath
    - Attending the synagogue
    - And keeping the feasts and ritual observances
  - As a result, not only were they distrusted, but they were also viewed as being in continual violation of the religious laws and therefore considered to be in a perpetual state of being ceremonially unclean.
  - That is not to say that being a shepherd was an illegitimate occupation.
    - Two of the most significant figures in Israel’s history, Moses ([Ex 3:1](#)) and David ([1 Sam. 16:11–13](#)), were both shepherds at some point in their lives.
    - Moreover, the Old Testament refers metaphorically in the Psalms to God as the “Shepherd of Israel” ([Ps. 80:1](#); cf. [23:1](#); [Isa. 40:11](#))
    - And of course Jesus described Himself as the “good shepherd” ([John 10:11, 14](#); cf. [Heb. 13:20](#); [1 Peter 2:25](#); [5:4](#)).
    - It wasn’t the work itself but the type of people who did the job that were the problem
  - And so a shepherd was lowly, and of very humble means; they certainly were not the ones you would expect to receive the most significant announcement in all of history.

- The animals they most often cared for were no help in raising their levels of self-esteem
  - Those who raise these animals today will tell you that there is likely no creature on earth dumber than a sheep
    - They will put their heads down and nibble the grass down into the roots in the dirt itself if no one stops them
    - They get lost easily
      - When they are grazing they never lift their heads
      - If they wander off they will not know where they are or the path they took
      - And if the shepherd does not find them, there is no way a sheep will come back to a herd on its own
      - And, if a sheep falls down, it is virtually impossible for them to get back up on their own
      - They are a mess – perhaps we can understand why Jesus called His followers “sheep”
- Shepherds are out in the open fields for weeks if not months on end searching for pasture and water
  - Not only keeping an eye out for wild animals but thieves as well
  - All in all, a lonely, monotonous job that had little attached to it that would evoke joy
- Yet, like Paul in prison, these men, these outcasts, in many ways in their own prison, found a joy that was beyond their understanding.

How do we come to possess that same joy this Christmas season?

- There are many things that we could site and rightly point to – but I will offer just two

1. Recognize and embrace the blessings of your life

- a. These men in the fields far away from the city are trying to come to grips with what they have just experienced
  - i. An angel has just spoken to them and told them something amazing
  - ii. And yet they were not afraid, and they were filled with joy
- b. But before they are settled on that, they are startled again
  - i. Not just one but a multitude of angels
  - ii. Other translations say a vast host, vast heavenly army, angelic army, a great company
  - iii. One account says 10,000 times 10,000
    1. That would be 100 million angels all singing glory to God
    2. Whatever the number, these shepherds are experiencing a blessing like nothing else they have ever witnessed
- c. They now had a choice
  - i. They could respond in the negative (the sheep scattered, we can't leave them, Bethlehem is too far)
  - ii. Or they could focus on the blessing of what they just experienced

- d. Joy builds in our lives in many ways, and one of the most important of those is when we focus on the goodness of God

2. Share the blessings of God with others

- a. The blessings of God encompass every area of our life
  - i. Again, remove physical or monetary things as the measure of blessing
  - ii. Contentment, comfort of mind and spirit, laughter, kindness, and, yes, joy are great blessings that need to be shared with those around you.
- b. As Christians, we must always be on the look-out for a Chippie
  - i. What's a chippie? – glad you asked
  - ii. Chippie is the name of a small, beautiful parakeet
  - iii. The story begins the day Chippie's owner decided that his cage needed to be cleaned
    - 1. And so she brought out the vacuum cleaner, turned it on and carefully began sweeping the bottom of the cage while the bird pressed himself against the far side
    - 2. Well, the phone rang and as she reached with her free hand she did not realize that the hand holding the nozzle which had been pointed at the floor was now moving to the far side of the cage
    - 3. Before she knew it and to her horror, she watched as Chippie got sucked into the tube
    - 4. She quickly hung up, shut off the machine and tore open the bag looking for the little fella
    - 5. She found him, alive, a little dazed, and covered in thick dust and dirt
    - 6. Realizing she needed to get him cleaned off she ran with him into the bathroom, turned on the bathtub faucet and held Chippie under the water giving him a power washing
    - 7. She quickly realized that this was a lot of water and it was very cold so much so that the little bird was now shivering in her hand
    - 8. So, being a compassionate, concerned pet-owner she grabbed her blow-dryer and blasted the bird with hot air to get him warmed up and dried off.
  - iv. Now you may at this point be asking, did Chippie survive all of this?
    - 1. Yes, he did
    - 2. But he didn't sing again for a long time
    - 3. He just sat quietly in his cage eyeing the closet door where the vacuum cleaner was kept
  - v. Being sucked up, washed out, and blown dry had stolen the joy from his heart
    - 1. And can you blame him after what he had endured?
    - 2. You can easily see why Chippie did not have much joy
  - vi. Well, this is where many people find themselves, especially at this time of year

1. Through circumstances and events that may or may not be a result of their own actions, they are lost, troubled, sad, fearful, and perhaps even devastated
  2. They are anything but joyful
  3. And they might need more than anything to share in the joy of someone else
- c. Paul, too found himself in a place that was anything but joyful
- i. But he focused on the blessings of God
  - ii. And he shared that joy with others
    1. So that they, too, could focus on God's goodness
    2. No matter their circumstances

Joy may not be easy to define verbally, but it should be at the heart of every believer, depending on where you put your focus

God has blessed each and every one of us, His children, and He continues to do so

- But what do you choose to focus on?
- And what do you do with that joy, those blessings?
- Do you keep them all for yourself, or are you quick, eager, and willing to share them with others?

This time of year is filled with great joy and for some great struggle and even sorrow

- How many Chippies are you going to come across?
  - Those who are finding it very difficult to be filled with joy
- Be grateful for all that God has done for you
- And be ready to share that joy with those God will bring in your path
- At the heart of Christmas is hope, peace, and joy because of the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ