

The Joy of God
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Psalm 16

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me, because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Four major themes that are central to Christianity and what it means to be a Christian are hope, joy, love, and peace. This November Steve and I are preaching on these four themes as we prepare for Advent and the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Last week Steve began by talking about hope; specifically about how we are all to be people of hope even in spite of all of the bad things that we see and experience in the world. We are to be people of hope because of the love that God has for each and every one of us.

If hope is the baseline, the place where we're supposed to start as people of faith, we turn today to talk a little bit about how our lives should be impacted by the hope that we have. Today we're going to spend some time investigating the theme of joy and the way in which we are called to live our lives as people of joy.

Joy is a concept that I am afraid is all too often misunderstood in our world today. We tend to let ourselves believe that joy, or happiness, are about having all of the things that we want, about being totally satisfied, about always being in a good mood, and about always smiling and being happy. But, as we strive to put on our happy appearances, how often do we mask and hide the things that bother and trouble us. How often do we

answer the question, “How are you doing?” with a simple “good” or “fine” even when we want to say so much more – I’m tired, I’m stressed, I’m worried about the future, my friends and family are driving me crazy! So often though, we simply smile and answer in the ways that we feel we’re supposed to – we want to put forward the appearance that all is good, that we’re happy.

While *Desperate Housewives* is such an over the top farce of suburban American life, I appreciate so many of the characters. Bree is a perfect example of a person who is overly concerned with outside appearances. She is constantly covering up the truth and striving to put on a happy face so that the people around her will see how happy and joyful she is. The reality is though, that she masks so much pain and disappointment trying to put forward the appearances of being joyful.

Joy, is not the false appearances that we often put forward. Joy is not the suburban euphoria that television and advertisers portray it to be. Joy is not about having all of the things we could possibly want and being totally secure in our future. Joy is contentment with the realities of the present. True joy comes when we are able to honestly name the things about life that could be better or different, while at the same time being content with and feeling a sense of peace with life – it is about being honest about how things are and being content with the realities that surround us.

The psalms are a beautiful collection of stories about the interactions between God and God’s people. There are stories of complaint and outcry and there are stories of comfort and protection. One of the things that I appreciate so much about the psalms is the way in which they portray God’s people wrestling with God in very real and faith-filled ways.

A great example of this is Psalm 16. Psalm 16 is the last in a series of psalms that begins with Psalm 13. In Psalm 13 the psalmist cries out to God in complaint, but by the time we get to Psalm 16 the tone has changed and the Psalmist is singing praises to God of comfort and assurance. In Psalm 16 we see deep and profound affirmations of faith that conclude with the assurance that in God's presence there is fullness of joy...!

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me, because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

In Psalm 16 the Psalmist talks about the joy of God, specifically naming three different ways in which we can experience and better come to know and understand the joy of God.

The first of these ways that we can experience the joy of God is through the protection that God provides to us. In the first verse of Psalm 16 the psalmist cries out to God, "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge." God offers us shelter and protection.

This theme is illustrated in a variety of places throughout the bible, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the story of the Exodus. As God is leading the Israelites out of captivity they have to cross the reed or the red sea. In a scene that has been made quite famous by Charlton Heston's "The 10 Commandments" as well as Dreamworks' "The Prince of Egypt," we see the Egyptian army getting swallowed up in the sea after the Israelites have crossed to dry land. God is a God who offers us protection.

The idea that God offers us protection is one that is easy for us to take for granted in our comfortable and relatively secure suburban lives. However, thousands of American men and women who are serving in our armed forces have to rely on the strength and protection of God in very real and tangible ways day in and day out. Our brave servicemen and women are protected by God's love and care, women and children in abusive situations are protected by God's love and care, all people everywhere who hurt and live in fear are protected by God's love and care. This protection is a great cause for joy!

Secondly, Psalm 16 teaches us about the joy of being in relationship with God to the degree that God offers and provides us with counsel and guidance. As the psalmist puts it, "I bless the Lord who gives me counsel." God is a God who calls us and offers us guidance and counsel.

This theme is illustrated in a variety of places throughout the text, especially in the Psalms. In Psalm 48 the Psalmist says, "...this is God, our God forever and ever, he will be our guide forever." And words from Psalm 119 made famous by Michael W. Smith and Amy Grant, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." God is a God who is with us constantly, calling and guiding us, offering us counsel.

We don't experience this call of God and the guidance of God in bold and direct ways. It is unlikely that we've ever had an experience like Moses with a burning bush, in fact if we were to admit to something like that today we'd probably be locked up for supervision. However, God does speak to us and offers us counsel even when we might not be aware of it. If you have ever felt some kind of a nudge or a prodding that you couldn't understand, that is God. If you've ever suddenly felt like, for whatever reason,

you need to call or check in a friend, it is likely the voice of God guiding you.

Sometimes these nudgings happen in the midst of our day to day routines and sometimes, when we're struggling for direction, we have to seek them out by spending intentional time in prayer. The good news though, is that God is a God who offers us counsel and guidance and this is a great cause for joy!

Finally, Psalm 16 teaches us about God's desire to put us on a path toward life. Specifically the psalmist says to God, "You show me the path of life..." God is a God who shows us the path of life.

This work of God, that calls us and shows us the path to life, is one to which the Bible testifies time and time again. One of my favorite texts in the entire bible is John 10:10 in which Jesus speaks, "...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." God is a God who desires for all of God's creatures to be on the path of life – Jesus came so that we might have life abundantly.

I was reminded of this passage and of the work for God to put us on the path to life on the youth retreat this last weekend. Last weekend 30 youth and 6 adults went away for a time of study, conversation, worship, and fun. During the weekend I had the privilege of seeing several of the youth really grow deeper in their connection with God in some amazing and powerful ways. It is always so beautiful for me to see the youth, or anyone for that matter, begin to realize that the life full of material things offered to us by the conventional wisdom of our day, is nothing compared to the abundant life that God offers us. The good news is that God is a God who offers us abundant life and this is a great cause for joy!

So, what does all of this mean for us today? God is a God who offers protection, God is a God who offers counsel and guidance, God is a God who invites us to join God on the path of life – again, what does this mean for us? It means that we are to live lives of grateful joy out of thanksgiving for all that God has done, is, and will be doing for us.

In his book *Believe the Believable*, that a number of us are reading and studying on Wednesday nights, Virgil Brady talks about two different ways of understanding the world and God's relationship with the world. He calls the first the requirement/reward system and the second the Gospel system. I think it's important for us to spend just a couple of minutes looking at both of these today.

First of all, Brady argues that the requirement/reward system is the prevailing way in which people interact with one another. By extension, this is how people believe that God connects with and interacts with them in the world. In its simplest form the requirement/reward system is this – we have to earn God's love and grace. We have to be good people, we have to do the right things, we have to avoid making mistakes, and then, in the end we can be with God in heaven.

Two primary modes of operation within the requirement/reward system are fear and guilt. People do the things they think they're supposed to do because they are afraid of what will happen if they don't. At the same time, people sometimes do things out of a sense of guilt when they're operating within this system. All too often, people living with the requirement/reward system relate to God out of more of a sense of fear – they are fearful for not doing enough of the good things or fearful that they may screw up and do bad things. Either way, when fear is the primary motivator for how we function in

relationship to God, it is not a healthy situation. In this way of thinking people act in hopes of earning God's love and acceptance.

In stark contrast to the requirement/reward system is the Gospel System. In the Gospel system, God loves us exactly the way we are in spite of our imperfections and our flaws. The good news, the gospel, is that we are loved and accepted and that we don't have to do anything to earn that love or acceptance. In the Gospel system, we do nice and caring things because these actions will be the natural extension of the unconditional love that God shows to us. When we understand and begin to live within the Gospel system, we don't do good things to earn God's love, we do good things as a joyful and thankful response to the good that God has done and is doing.

There is much for us to be joyful about as people of God. God protects us, God guides us, and God offers us abundant life. These are all gifts offered to us without a charge, without any strings attached. If we can begin to live within the gospel system, if we can begin to understand that God loves us unconditionally and that we are called to respond to that love with joy and thanksgiving, then we will be able to live our lives more fully understanding, experiencing, and sharing the joy of God.