

"Joy"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, open our hearts and minds to your joy; joy that you give to us for sharing. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Last week, a woman saw a father Christmas shopping in a busy store with a fussy, rambunctious two-year-old in his cart and overheard the man whisper: "Be patient, Billy. You can handle this, Billy. It's okay, Billy. Be calm, Billy."

The woman said to the father, "I don't mean to interrupt your shopping, but I just had to tell you how much joy it brings me to see how wonderfully loving and patient you are with little Billy." The man replied, "Actually, Ma'am, my son's name is Patrick. My name is Billy."

There's joy in a good joke, but true joy is much more than that.

The famous American evangelist, preacher and publisher D. L. Moody says it well, "Happiness is caused by things that happen around me, and circumstances will mar it; but joy flows right on through trouble; joy flows on through the dark; joy flows in the night as well as in the day; joy flows all through persecution and opposition. It is an unceasing fountain bubbling up in the heart; a secret spring the world can't see and doesn't know anything about. The Lord gives His people perpetual joy when they walk in obedience to Him."

At first blush, Luke's recounting of the teaching of John the Baptist today doesn't sound very joyful.

John begins with an alarming call to the crowds. He says to those seeking baptism by him, "You brood of vipers," which brings forth an image of malicious evil-doers slithering away as if from a fire; a dangerous tangle of poisonous snakes. The crowds were fleeing from the coming fire of judgement, hoping for a quick-fix baptism by John the Baptist.

To have a crowd gather, John's call from the wilderness for the people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins must have been successful. Ironically, in this passage, John questions their motives and asks "who warned you

to flee from the wrath to come” – the “who” that warned them was likely John himself! Some of those gathered may have thought that baptism was a quick fix, but John calls for a radical change of lifestyle that reflects the genuineness of our repentance. It’s an individual call that requires personal decisions to live faithfully and exhibit faithfulness like Abraham. Merely having Abraham as an ancestor isn’t enough.

In this radical call for a change of lifestyle, John challenges the crowd to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” The need to prune fruit trees and grape vines, and the burning of unproductive branches was common in rural Israel. The image was often used metaphorically, to represent Israel and God’s expectation of producing good fruit among the faithful people of Israel. The joy seems to be for the faithful who bear good fruit – and clearly not for the unproductive branches that are pruned and burned.

At a church conference, the gathered people were given helium filled balloons and told to release them at some point in the service when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts. All through the service, balloons ascended, but when the service was over, 1/3 of the balloons were still unreleased. How sad.

Kent Crockett, in his book, *I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint* tells of a time when his wife, Cindy refueled their car at a local gas station. Instead of driving up to the self-serve pump, Cindy accidentally pulled up to full-service. She didn’t realize the luxury service cost an extra fifty cents per gallon until she paid for the gas. Later, Cindy told Kent how much the station had hiked the prices on full-service.

Kent was upset. He thought that the extra fifty cents per gallon was surely a violation of some federal law. He calculated that the extra seven dollars Cindy spent on full-service would have taken their vehicle 128.3 miles farther down the road if she had bought self-serve gas. This “full-service gas station robbery” had him fuming for several hours.

As Kent was mulling over this terrible injustice, it occurred to him that he had sold his joy for seven dollars. Kent says, “I never realized how cheaply I would

surrender something so valuable ... I exchanged my joy for seven dollars' worth of gas." Kent asks us, "At what price are you willing to sell your joy?"

The crowds gathered around John the Baptist are hoping for peace and joy and love, and they understand the need for ethical reform. Luke tells us that three different groups openly ask John what they should do. And John gives them each some concrete examples. John tells the crowds to share with those in need; not to give everything away, but to share from their surplus. The tax collectors, and then finally, the soldiers, who were both generally hated by the crowds, are told to be fair and honest and not to use their power inappropriately; to do their jobs, but to do them honourably. Generosity, unselfishness and fairness are the fruits worthy of true repentance. The community benefits because individual acts of love multiply by bringing joy to the receiver as well as to the giver.

The people begin to feel joy in hearing the teaching of John the Baptist and they think that he might be the long-awaited Messiah. John says "No," he is not worthy to even untie the thong of the sandals of the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. The image of fire is of a refiner's fire that separates the pure metal from impurities. We're baptised with the Holy Spirit and fire, and the unproductive branches and chaff are burned away. God nurtures the productive branches and gathers the good grain into God's granary. We're encouraged to be productive in our faith and to experience the joy of being gathered together into God's love for us.

Dr. James Dobson relates a wonderful story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope. Stella was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior from cancer. Now, several days before Christmas, Stella was almost snowed in by a brutal storm. She felt terribly alone, so much so that she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas.

Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. "Mrs. Thornhope?" he inquired. Stella nodded and invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and asked him, "What's in the box?" The young man laughed, opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a Golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the

squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, Ma'am." The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness.

"Who sent this?" Stella asked. The young man set the puppy down and handed her an envelope and said, "It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It's a Christmas gift to you." The young man then handed her a book, *How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever*. In desperation Stella asked again, "Who sent me this puppy?" As the young man turned to leave, he said, "Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas!"

Stella opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young puppy to keep her company until then.

Stella wiped away her tears, put the letter down, and then, remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up the golden furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined her neighbour's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of "Joy to the World, the Lord has come." Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than her grief and loneliness. "Little fella," she said to the dog, "It's just you and me. But you know what? There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'd like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it."

God has a way of sending us gifts of joy. Sometimes they come with tears of joy. Let's not sell our joy. Let's acknowledge our joy and let our balloons go. Let's live in the wonder of God's joy this Christmas season and forever. Amen.