

Impossibly Good: "Joy"

Advent 4

12-18-16

Text: Matthew 1:18-25



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

"When is the last time you found yourself alone with God? How might you create space in your day for pondering? How might you intentionally quiet the other voices in your life so that you might better recognize God's?" (John 10:27)

"What is the joy that is set before you; that is presently available? Is it possible that the joy that God longs to give you can be found in the context of the life that you are currently experiencing? "Where might you be able to find joy in your life where you never thought of looking?"

"Is it possible that the joy available to you is in the power of the commitments that you make in midst of the difficult marriage, the demanding children, the thankless job, and the aging parents?"

"Are you certain that there is no One who knows you better than you do? Are you convinced that no one can love and care for you like you can? Are you certain that no one knows what's better for you than you?" (Romans 8:31-39; Matthew 6:25-34)

Your response...

"Despite my uncertainty, I want to have confidence that God will work his goodness in _____" (a circumstance or relationship).

Teaching Notes...

It was the church that introduced me to the theater and gave me permission to pursue my "thespian" interests. I don't remember the title of the dramatic presentation, but I do know that it was a "low budget" production; not a lot of complicated make-up and wardrobe--- a head covering made from a remnant from my mom's sewing pile and my basketball headband, my bathrobe, and some sandals made from cardboard and string.

There were no auditions... we couldn't afford to "cut" anyone. I was fortunate enough to secured a dual-role: "nativity bystander #3" and curtain puller. My thespian pursuits were launched in relative obscurity. The message seemed polite, but clear enough: "Phil, why don't you go stand over there?"

Joseph strikes me as just such a character. He's never "center-stage" and, in fact, although he has a major role in the unfolding God-drama, he gets no speaking parts.

You would likely not be able to pick him out in the cast photo and when Mark is scrolling through the credits, he doesn't even mention Joseph, by name.

"What do we know about him?"

- ~ Bound in engagement to Mary.
- ~ He is the legal, earthly father of Jesus. Although not the biological father, we would assume that he would assist with some of the normal, day-to-day, responsibilities: changing the baby God, bouncing the Messiah on his knees, encouraging the Word's first words (it's a bit complicated).
- ~ His father's name was Jacob (Matthew 1).
- ~ It's assumed that since he is not mentioned in the scenes regarding Jesus' crucifixion, that he has died sometime prior.
- ~ He's a *"tektōn"*... Greek for craftsman. He taught God how to work with wood!
- ~ He lives his life in relative obscurity [joy in obscurity]. He lived meaningfully with little fanfare.
- ~ He was righteous. His life demonstrated a rightness (relational term; producing right responses).

Joseph was habitually obedient.

"When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded..." Matthew 1:24

"And Joseph named him Jesus". Matthew 1:25

"That night, Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother". Matthew 2:14

"So, Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother". Matthew 1:21

"... after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee..." Matthew 2:22

Joseph is identified as a "righteous" man. Righteousness is not to be confused with moralism, but is best understood as a way of life that adapts to and is reflective of God's will and God's desires, as a result of intimacy [mutually-revealing].

Both Joseph and Mary have vivid encounters of God which result, not only in hopeful possibilities, but in significant perplexity (confusion). Both are faced with the possibilities of what life would be like should they surrender to grace.

God showed up to Joseph in dreams because it was the only way that he could communicate with him and ensure that his understanding would not be limited to his intellect. It's not that God's revelation bypasses our intellect, but that it simply cannot be limited by it.

At some point, we discover that our "accountability group" is of little benefit, because **we find ourselves "alone with God"**. Not isolated. Not alienated. Solitary. Not left "to" ourselves, but left "by" ourselves.

Joy necessitates obedience.

If Mary is prototypical of the ways in which God overshadows us and conceives his creative work in our lives, then Joseph typifies how that revelation gets worked out in very concrete and often undramatic fashion in our reality.

Each time Joseph responds in obedience to revelation, he becomes the recipient of further revelation which established his credibility, validates his trust, creates history with God, and moors his faith in

God's goodness which evokes joy rather than frightful reaction--- but does not necessarily eliminate the confusion.

His obedience is not defined as obligatory concession to some arbitrary God-demands, but as the posture which resulted in "calm delight"--- joy.

Once we determine to respond in loving-obedience to the life-giving ways of Jesus--- despite our hesitation and despite the absence of affirming emotions--- we actually experience a grace that was previously unavailable to us and the "blessed life" that results.

Joy is something you experience now because it is something that you have "set before you". Joy is our "real time" response.

Hebrews 12:2

"... keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross..."

To endure is not simply some form of "white-knuckled-grin-and-bear-it" tenacity, but a confidence which has outlasted your adversity without abandoning God.

It doesn't matter how much you can tolerate or what your pain threshold, if you don't believe that God is good your endurance will result, not in joy, but in resentment and bitterness.

To attend to what's before us is (right in front of us; to be present or at hand) where we find our joy. It is out of the raw materials of our present situation that God creates the opportunities for joy. I think this is really great news, because it means that our sense of inner-confidence and calm is much less circumstantial, than we had believed.

I think joy is harder to hold onto than fear.

I think it's easier to be afraid than it is to be joyful (hopefully expectant) because being fearful doesn't require as much of us. I think fear reminds us that we are not as joy-full as we had assumed. We are not as confident in God's goodness as we are in our own "home remedies".

This story is about the "glorious God" and how, as he shows up (reveals himself), he re-asserts his centrality and re-inserts himself into the activity.

"I am the Lord, that is my name! I will not give my glory to anyone else, nor share my praise with carved idols". Isaiah 42:8

There is a truth, the implications of which cannot be extracted fully today: the idea that the beauty of God glorifying himself (making himself big, not to reduce us, but so that we might see our glory) and our need to experience joy are not incompatible.

As we glory in God, our hearts are satisfied and as our hearts "rejoice in God our Savior" (Luke 1:47), God is more glorified in our lives.

Our joy is never sacrificed for the sake of glorifying God, rather, they come together in one and the same act--- no challenge can forfeit it, no pleasure can compete with it, no sacrifice (in the context of the impossible goodness of God) will be considered too great to experience it.

Our self-prescribed, manageable, dutiful, will-powered, compliant determination cannot and will not allow for the joyful experience that the love of God will engender. The hope of the Christian life is not simply that we will be enabled to now do what God demands of us, but that our desires and affections will be transformed so that we are now loving the right things, therefore, those pursuits will result in blessing.

I would suggest that to know God as “impossibly good” is to know no boundaries to his love for you and no limits on the extent to which you are willing to obey, for the sake of love.