

Rediscover Joy
Matthew 2, Luke 1

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Have you ever been to Yellowstone National Park? It was the first national park established in the world. In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the act that set aside Yellowstone as a protected treasure.

Yellowstone is unique in that it has the largest concentration of geysers on the entire planet. Over half of the world's known active geysers are in Yellowstone National Park.

The park basically sits on top of a huge super volcano brewing beneath the earth's surface, and all over the park, this brewing heat forces its way through the earth and works its way to the surface.

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The most famous geyser in the park, Old Faithful, shoots huge fountains of water and steam up to 180 feet in the air. It erupts about 20 times a day.

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Then there are the muddy geysers called the mudpots. These are cauldrons of goo somewhere between liquid and solid.

They're kind of like a pot of oatmeal simmering on a stove. These geysers burble and burp and boil, releasing bubbles of heat and gas and superheated mud into the air.

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Then there's the Grand Prismatic Spring. It's the largest hot spring in the United States, and the third largest in the world.

But unlike Old Faithful, which just explodes, it just bubbles up and spreads out.

Yet, since the ground around the spring is rich with iron oxide and other colorful minerals, the Grand Prismatic Spring has breathtaking colors.

So, why am I talking about geysers and mudpots this morning? Because they remind me of a fundamental truth: *Whenever there is pressure, there must be some way to release that pressure.*

All of Yellowstone is like the vent cap on a pressure cooker. Without some way to vent the superheated water underground, the entire state of Wyoming might just explode.

The second fundamental truth is this: Whatever is beneath the surface will be what rises to the top, when the pressure builds.

It could be just hot water, like Old Faithful. It could just be superheated, muddy sludge and toxic gases, like the mud pots, or it could be brilliant colors, like at the Grand Prismatic Spring.

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This is the Fly Geyser in Nevada. It looks like the fountain at a miniature golf course, but it's real!

This actually started forming only about a hundred years ago, when a rancher was drilling for irrigation water. As he was drilling, he accidentally opened a geothermal pocket.

The color is created by a species of brightly colored algae that apparently thrives with superheated water.

This is similar to 2020, when we were subjected to more pressure than maybe any time in our lifetimes. Many felt that they were about to explode.

So, let's get back to that fundamental, basic truth, *"What's below the surface is what will rise to the top when the pressure builds."*

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There were probably various times this year when you've just wanted to blow off some steam, like Old Faithful.

Maybe there's been times when frustration, anger, or fear has built up and you've just spewed something toxic—whether it was on a family member, a friend, or someone on social media.

We're in our Christmas series and this week we're going to rediscover joy as joy bubbles up throughout the Christmas story.

But it's important to note that this joy isn't separate from pain and disappointment. In fact, much of this joy is born out of a lot of pressure, a lot of disappointment, and grief.

Turn to Luke 1, starting in verse 5. Notice that Luke's Christmas story begins a little earlier than Mary and Joseph and Jesus. It begins with a prophet named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

Luke 1:5-7, "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old."

This short paragraph spoke volumes to Luke's original audience because it mentioned Herod, the Roman king who kept the Jews under harsh Roman control. These were difficult times.

Then we're introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth, both of priestly lineage. In a day with a lot of religious corruption and power plays by the Pharisees and Sadducees, Zechariah and Elizabeth were a stark contrast.

They're described as righteous, blameless, and faithful. This is especially important in light of what Luke tells us next. Zechariah and Elizabeth have never been able to have children.

That changed suddenly and miraculously when the archangel Gabriel showed up and told Zechariah that his wife was going to have a son.

Not just any son, but a powerful prophetic son who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Zechariah was so overwhelmed he could hardly believe this news.

So, when he doubtfully questioned the angel, he was told, *"Okay, here's your sign. You won't be able to speak until the child is born,"* leaving the prophet writing and signing to everyone to explain what's happened.

It seems Elizabeth was quicker to believe the news. In verse 25, after she became pregnant, she says, *"The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

Think about what boiled up between these two people. Doubt came to the surface for poor Zechariah, but for Elizabeth, it was joy.

Joy that she almost didn't dare to believe! Joy that maybe she wasn't sure she was allowed to have.

She probably thought, “*Can I risk believing that God has good things for me?*” “*Can I take a leap of faith and trust that God will do what He says He will do?*”

The first thing I’d like us to rediscover this morning about joy is that joy and happiness are allowed.

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We need to rediscover that joy and happiness are permitted. Now, for some of you, this is a no-brainer. Of course, it’s okay to be happy and joyful.

In fact, most of us are naturally positive people. But for others, they’ve grown up thinking that joy and happiness are two different things.

This is because our culture has defined happiness as fleeting and temporary, while joy is deeper and more fulfilling.

Our Christian culture has begun to believe happiness is secular and less valuable or fulfilling, while joy is spiritual; more important and fulfilling.

When Gabriel told Zechariah about the coming birth of John the Baptist, he said in verse 14,
“He will be a joy and delight [happiness] to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.”

In the Greek, these are two different words. Joy is *kara*, while delight or happiness is *a-ga-li-a-sis*.

But in actuality, the Bible doesn’t make any distinction between joy and happiness. They are essentially different words for the same thing.

Now, they may have slightly different nuances, as they've been translated somewhat differently in our different English translations of the Bible.

But the original Hebrew and Greek terms used in the Bible to describe joy and happiness are essentially interchangeable.

It might make you a little uncomfortable to give yourself permission to be joyful and happy if you have a serious or melancholy temperament.

You might have been conditioned to think that Christianity is all about performing and measuring up.

You might have grown up with a heavier focus on the “*deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me*” aspect of discipleship. So, this Christmas, give yourself permission to be joyful and happy.

There's great joy in the Christmas season, and it's good to embrace and celebrate that joy.

But to those of you who find yourselves driven by obligation, busyness, or guilt in this season, it's okay to pause and embrace a part of the season that brings you personal happiness.

To those of you who find Christmas to be a painful, difficult season; to those of you who're hurting, or grieving personally, or feeling discouraged; and to those of you who are happy to revel in this season, it's okay to feel and to embrace joy.

God sees us no matter where we are on the emotional spectrum of happiness. Our longing for happiness and joy is a natural desire that God has placed within us as a reflection of His own joyful nature.

If this were a movie, this is where we'd get some kind of subtitle message like, “*Meanwhile, in Galilee...*”

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, Gabriel made another earthly appearance, this time to Mary, and he delivered the most miraculous pregnancy announcement of all.

In verse 31 and 32, he told Mary that she was going to give birth to Jesus, and He'll be the Son of the Lord Most High.

Not only that but He'll inherit the throne of David, and reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Mary received the news gracefully and willingly, but at some point Mary must have known that challenges and disgrace were about to begin.

She knew she would face scorn and shame, as well as her family and her fiancé. She knew the pressure would be tremendous when it became obvious she was pregnant and unmarried.

How do you make people believe the baby in your womb is God's Son? Even Joseph didn't believe this news.

He even planned to break off their engagement in what would have been a divorce in that culture.

Mary's journey wouldn't be an easy one. Maybe that's why, as Luke tells us in Luke 1:39, Mary "*hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.*"

Mary must have heard about her relative Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy. "*If anyone will understand, it has to be Elizabeth,*" she might have thought. If so, she was right.

This is where the joy erupts. Against the backdrop of discouragement, disgrace, grief, and shame, joy comes bursting through.

When fear and anxiety about the future could have crippled Mary, she found someone with whom to share her news.

Which brings us to the second thing we discover this morning, joy shared makes joy stronger.

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Listen to what occurred upon Mary's arrival at Elizabeth's house.

Luke 1:41-45, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

What a relief this must have been for Mary. She didn't have to explain herself. She didn't have to worry about being understood. All she had to do was say hello and Elizabeth knew.

Even Elizabeth's developing baby knew and leaped within her. This was the affirmation and encouragement Mary needed. She was so joyful, she burst into song.

Luke 1:46-48, "And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."

When Mary shares her news, she finds joy welling up inside her own spirit! I believe that joy gave her the strength she needed to return to her hometown and face down all the criticism she would get.

Elizabeth confirmed that the baby growing inside Mary's womb was from the Holy Spirit. Joy shared makes joy stronger. This is not only in Mary's case, it makes us stronger, too!

Now, there's a tiny little detail in the Christmas story that, to be honest, I've never heard anyone talk about, but it caught my eye as I was studying this week.

In Luke 1:24, we read that after Elizabeth found she was pregnant, she kept herself in seclusion for five months.

Why was she in seclusion for five months? The text doesn't say. Maybe it was because she was the poster child of a high risk pregnancy, and this was the first century equivalent of complete bed rest.

Maybe there had been previous pregnancies that had ended with a miscarriage, and she didn't want to take any chances of losing this one.

Maybe she had gotten used to seclusion. For Elizabeth, the inability to have children would've been a lifelong source of pain, sorrow, and shame. It was a big deal in that culture.

The great hopes of the young couple Elizabeth and Zechariah would have eventually faded through the years as they tried repeatedly to have a child.

Elizabeth's self-worth probably sunk as the years passed and hope dimmed.

At some point, everyone around her would have declared Elizabeth barren and branded her with this lifelong stigma.

Regardless of the reasons for her seclusion, when she was six months into her pregnancy, her seclusion was interrupted by her cousin Mary, and just as Elizabeth gave Mary strength, I believe Mary encouraged Elizabeth.

All her life Elizabeth probably felt like a second-class citizen, but now she's being visited by the mother of the Messiah! Can you imagine? No wonder Elizabeth said, *"Why am I so favored?"*

She had been used to feeling like she was being punished that she barely allowed herself to feel any joy.

Our true source of happiness, joy, and fulfillment comes from Christ. Christmas is a season of joy because the Messiah brought joy into the world. Jesus provided us the way of ultimate fulfillment and life.

I'm not suggesting that this is a *"Don't worry, be happy, put on a plastic smile and fake it kind of joy."*

Sometimes this joy is a rushing fountain erupting from our spirits, and sometimes it's a thick, slow bubble to the surface.

Wherever you find yourself today, let me encourage you that the joy of the Lord can be felt no matter what we're facing, which leads us to our final point.

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We need to rediscover that joy is a choice. I want to jump over to Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus for just a minute to pick up a part of the story we don't get from Luke.

It's the part that deals with the magi, or wise men, and King Herod. In the magi and King Herod, we see two different responses to the news of Jesus birth.

The wise men saw the star and rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. They traveled hundreds of miles seeking Jesus. They sacrificed extravagantly. They risked their lives, and they chose joy.

King Herod, on the other hand, chose to be threatened by the news of a new King of the Jews.

Even though he was right there in Jerusalem, only seven miles or so away from Bethlehem, he didn't seek Jesus. He was "*greatly disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*" Remember the truth that we started with: "*Whatever is inside is what boils over.*"

When Herod learned that he had been tricked by the wise men, what boiled over was rage and murder and hatred. Herod was just one big, ugly, toxic, superheated mudpot.

Joy is a choice. Look closely at the word "rejoice." Rejoice is the verb form of joy. It's the action of feeling or expressing joy and delight. Notice that it begins with the prefix "*re.*"

The prefix "*re*" means once more, or again, or a return to. So, to rejoice is to return to joy. It's a choice, an action. We can choose to return to joy, to return to our source of joy: Jesus Christ.

I believe this is the only way we can find true delight and satisfaction. I believe the process is the same for all of us, whether we're feeling the happiness and joy of this season or not.

Whether we're buried in discouragement, or everything is going our way, none of us can conjure an unending supply of feel-good happiness all the time, no matter how optimistic or positive our natural disposition is.

Sooner or later, we'll all have one of those days, or weeks, or years, and in reality, we all have them way more often than we'd like. That's where the "re" comes in.

That's where we must return regularly and daily to Jesus. Why? He's our source of joy. Rejoicing is our process of refueling our tank, restoring our strength, and renewing our spirits. Reconnecting with our Savior helps us to rejoice.

In difficult times, there's much encouragement to be found in the "rejoices" of the Psalms. Psalm 13 is a great example.

It begins with the painful cry, "*How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?*," and ends with the reminder and declaration, "*But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.*"

The Psalms are honest and raw as the writers pour out their feelings in these prayer-like poems and songs.

Then we see the writers transition through the process of remembering and stirring themselves to rejoice and find strength in and from God.

This is where and how we find authentic joy. This is how we can celebrate in this season as we remember and turn to Jesus. Jesus Who is come to be with us and to give us joy.

It's a joy we have the freedom to express. It's a joy that we can choose. It's a joy that becomes stronger when we share it.

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Conclusion

I read a post about the old Christmas Carol, "*Good King Wenceslas.*" I'll be honest, I had no idea what this song was about, or even how to pronounce the name.

So, I looked up the lyrics and information about this song. He was a real person who lived in what's now the Czech republic in the tenth century.

The legend, on which the Christmas carol is based, says that on the day after Christmas, the Feast of Stephen, December 26, King Wenceslas was looking out his window that night and sees a poor peasant gathering wood for a fire.

He calls one of his servants over and he says, *“Do you know that guy?”* The servant says, *“Yes. He lives at the edge of the forest, about three miles away.”*

King Wenceslas says, *“Well, he looks cold and hungry. Let's bring him some food and firewood.”*

So, the King and his servant take off after the peasant. It's a cold night. The wind is howling, and the cold creeps into their bones.

After a while the servant said, *“I don't think I can go on any further. It's great that you want to take this food to him, but I'm going to freeze.”*

And, according to the legend, Good King Wenceslas told his servant to walk directly behind him, putting his feet down in the tracks Wenceslas left for him.

The servant found that if he walked in his master's footsteps, warmth and heat would come up the ground. If he just stayed close to his king, he would be warm.

The last stanza of the song says,

*“In his master's steps he trod,
where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod*

*which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
shall yourselves find blessing.”*

Joy is meant to be shared. If we're going to follow in the steps of the Master, it means meeting the needs of the hurting, the hungry, the fearful, and the anxious.