

Advent Week 3

REDISCOVERING JOY IN OUR DISCOURAGEMENT

The third Sunday of Advent signifies joy and reminds us of the angel's good news told to the shepherds. These daily devotions will lead you on a rediscovery of joy over the next seven days. Take time this week to light the third candle in your Advent wreath as well. Imagine yourself on the hillside where the joyous announcement was made by a sky-full of angels. Joy is possible even in the midst of hardship and discouragement. As you watch for joy in the world around you during this season, surrender the pain and fear in your life and ask God to fill you with the gift of His joy.



And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” —Luke 2:8-12

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. —Isaiah 61:10



What brings you the most joy at Christmas? What keeps you from experiencing joy?



Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. —1 Thessalonians 5:16-18



"Joy to the World"

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JOY FINDS A WAY

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. From now on all generations will call me blessed." —Luke 1:46-48

Have you ever been to Yellowstone National Park? It's an amazing place, filled with nature's majesty. It's also a unique place, basically sitting above a supervolcano beneath the earth's surface. That's where the park's famous geysers come from. All that geothermal heat and combustion down there has to go somewhere, so it rises to the surface, escaping through vents we know as geysers. Some like Old Faithful spout water 180 feet into the air. Others heat large hot spring pools and churn up kaleidoscopic minerals. Others ooze out in slowly bubbling mudpots.

Joy is kind of like those geysers. It's our feel-good emotion, and when it's there, it's going to find a way out. Sometimes it's quick to burst out. Sometimes it takes a while to work its way through the mud in our lives. Sometimes it's a combination of both.

Maybe that's the way it was for Mary and Elizabeth, two miraculous mothers-to-be in Luke's Christmas account. Both women were facing a mixture of emotions in their unexpected pregnancies. Behind Elizabeth's elation were decades of shame, scorn, and crushed dreams of having children. Maybe that's why she spent five months in seclusion. Behind Mary's wonder were judgment and scorn from others, and certainly some fear and confusion of her own. Maybe that's why Mary hurried to the hill country, away from the judgmental eyes of her neighbors.

But when the two women united, joy erupted. Elizabeth's baby, John the Baptist, leaped in the womb. The Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth, and she joyfully blessed and affirmed Mary. Then Mary burst into song, praising God and rejoicing. All the fear, uncertainty, and pain faded in the face of encouragement and joy.

How is your sense of joy in this season? Who can you reach out to in order to find encouragement or to encourage?

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JOY COMES IN THE MORNING

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? ... But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

—Psalm 13:1-2,5-6

When 11-year-old Riley moves across the country to San Francisco, her world is **thrown for a loop**. So are the five core emotions inside the headquarters of her brain: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. If you've seen the Disney movie *Inside Out*, you know those colorful characters are the ones who run the control panels of the girl's actions, experiences, and memories. Spoiler alert: After a meltdown in emotional headquarters, Riley's world is in upheaval. But there's a touching scene at the end when Joy hands over the controls of the emotional console to Sadness. Sadness is able to let Riley cry and let out all the bad feelings. As her parents support and hug her, Riley cries and smiles contentedly at the same time. And Sadness and Joy hold hands and form a new memory together.

Sadness and joy are often the same for us. Life is hard, and pain is real, even in the "joyous" Christmas season. Rather than putting on a fake smile or trying to power our way to happiness, it's important to express our hurts and sorrows. God wants us to pour out our hearts to Him. The psalmists give us great examples in their prayerful songs and poems. When we are willing to cry out, "Where are you God?" and allow Him to hold and support us, He can fill us with the comfort and strength to choose joy and experience His presence. As King David put it in Psalm 30:5, "Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

What sadness or pain do you need to express to find support? How can you create your own personal psalm to pour out your heart to God?

17

CELEBRATE JOY

Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. —Nehemiah 8:10

Christmas was a fairly forgotten holiday in London and most of England by the 1840s. Easter was celebrated. So was Boxing Day. But Christmas? Meh. So publishers didn't see why anyone would want to read Charles Dickens's latest book, *A Christmas Carol*. Turned out, everyone did. As we know, Dickens's story was a hit, and still is. Because of that book, Dickens has been credited with saving Christmas and shaping the way we celebrate the holiday today. Not just in England, but in the U.S. too.

Of course, we all know the story of Mr. Scrooge and his "Bah, humbug!" It's ultimately a tale of Scrooge's redemption, but the Crachit family serve as a reminder of the joy of the season, no matter how miserly and harsh the world is around us.

Long before Dickens, Israel's leader Nehemiah led the Jewish people back from exile in Babylon to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He also led them back to God and to the worship they had forgotten. When Nehemiah had God's Law read to the people, they wept with remorse and regret. But as a representative of God's work and voice, Nehemiah was a reminder of grace and restoration. His declaration was to celebrate and embrace the joy of the occasion, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

We know that the pace and activities of our holidays can bring a mixture of emotions that threatens to chase joy into the shadows. As we choose to cling to the joy of the Lord, let us embrace and experience the joy of the season in His hope, peace, and love in our lives.

What is squashing your Christmas joy? What can you say no to in order to say yes to joy this season?

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CHOOSE JOY

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. —James 1:2-4

If you've spent much time in nature, you've probably come across the odd sight of a tree growing out of a rock. In the city, you've probably seen a flower blooming out of a tiny crack in a sidewalk or street. Plants like that make a stark contrast to our expectations. They go against the grain of what we normally expect from nature and science. We know plants of all kinds need soil to grow and live. Yet these hardy botanical survivors somehow find a way to send roots through the tiniest crevices or to draw nutrients from the most meager supplies. They defy their harsh environments and find a way to thrive.

Joy allows us to do the same. It gives us the strength to persevere even when our circumstances look bleak and we are surrounded by cold, hard reality. Does it make sense to feel joy when we face trials? No. But when we choose joy, when we choose to look with thankfulness for what God will do even in our bleakest days, we can find the strength to persevere another day, and another, and another. And we continue to grow stronger in our rocky surroundings.

It's not easy. Maybe that's why Paul said it twice: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). He knew we needed reminders often. He had certainly lived through the difficulties of prison, beatings, hatred, ridicule, loneliness, injustice, and more. Yet Paul continued to choose the action of joy, to rejoice, and to place his focus on God, even when life felt like nothing but a rock and a hard place.

What is the rock you are facing right now? What step will you take to choose joy even when it's hard?

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FEEDING JOY

When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, LORD God Almighty. —Jeremiah 15:16

What is your favorite Christmas feast? Are you a traditional American big meal person, loading up the table with platters of turkey, ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, casseroles, cranberry relishes, and pies for dessert? Do you prefer or include other cultural delicacies? Does your table include tamales, latkes, Christmas pudding, *Buche de Noel*, suckling pig, lutefisk, or other dishes passed down by heritage or family preference? Food plays a big part in holiday traditions around the world. It certainly draws us together as family and friends to reunite and celebrate and share the joys—and sometimes the painful awkwardness—of each other's company.

How do we choose joy when the painful moments of the season or life in general feel crushingly heavy? One way is to devour God's Word like Jeremiah, who said, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight." In the same way, they are our spiritual sustenance. They feed us. The principle of "You are what you eat" applies to our spirits as well. As we take in the words of God, savoring and digesting them, they are able to refuel and renew us. They change our perspective and nourish joy within us, and they fill us with the strength to grow stronger, no matter what we are facing. Let's feast on the promises of God throughout this Advent season.

How is your spiritual diet? What Scripture will you choose to savor and return to throughout this week?

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

—Isaiah 61:10

Is there anything more radiant than a bride on her wedding day? She is the picture of beauty. We are captivated by weddings, and the bride is the center of attention. That's true whether it's your cousin's ceremony or England's Royal Wedding. Whatever the setting, the bride is the princess on her wedding day. Some little girls begin dreaming of that day as preschoolers twirling around in princess dresses and their mother's oversized high-heeled shoes. There is a beauty in the union of a bride and groom, and a purity in the moment when the bride appears and walks down the aisle to her soon-to-be husband. A wedding is one of the most joyful celebrations we can have on this earth.

It's one the Bible compares to our relationship with Jesus. Isaiah says God has clothed us like a bride or groom, fixing us up in our finest through His salvation and restoration. He has given us reason to experience joy like a wedding day. Jesus compared Himself to a bridegroom when He taught on earth. John used the imagery when he described Christ's return in Revelation 19:7: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."

When we think ahead to our eventual union with Jesus, we can find joy in the celebration of all it represents: Instead of sorrow, pain, or death, there will be joy, wholeness, and life. When we remember the significance of Jesus's birth and our first encounter with Him, we can experience joy that flows from His perfect, unconditional love.

What memories of your relationship with Jesus bring you joy? What do you imagine the wedding of Jesus and His followers will be like?

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JOY RESTORED

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
—Psalm 51:10-12

Christmas trees can trace their roots all the way back to ancient cultures, including the Egyptians and Romans who decorated with evergreen boughs to mark the Winter Solstice. The Christmas tree tradition we know got started in Germany in the 16th century, and it's believed that Martin Luther first added candles to light the tree and made it part of Christian celebrations. German settlers in Pennsylvania brought the tradition to the U.S. in the 1830s. But the trees became widely popular across the U.S. and Great Britain in 1846, when a London newspaper showed an illustration of Queen Victoria, the German Prince Albert, and their children celebrating around their Christmas tree. From the beginning, evergreens have been loved for their constant reminder of flourishing life through the long, dark winter. Even through December's shortest days, the evergreens promise a restoration of life and growth.

Sometimes we need a restoration of joy just like King David did when he wrote Psalm 51. His famous prayer followed the darkest days of his adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of her husband. David had finally hit his low and poured out his confession and remorse to God, asking for forgiveness and renewal. He longed for a restoration of the joy of his relationship with God.

How often we too need a cleansing fresh start! So much can jade our hearts and choke our joy, whether it's our own sin or the busyness and pressures of the holidays. Sometimes we need the honesty of confession and the simplicity of quiet reflection. No matter where we've been or what we've done, Jesus is here, welcoming us with restorative joy.

What is coming between you and God? How will you pour out your heart to God?