



"Joy is a Name"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On December 11th, 2022, from Isaiah 7:10-16 & Matthew 1:18-25*

There was a boy named Sam whose greatest wish was to get a new bicycle for Christmas. But Sam had not been the most well-behaved child that year, so when he asked his mother for a new bike, she told him to write a letter to Jesus instead of Santa to explain why he should get a bicycle for Christmas. So, Sam went to his room and wrote "Dear Jesus, I've been good, and you should give me a bike for Christmas." But then he thought lying might not be the best way to get a bike. So, he tried again, this time writing "Dear Jesus, I COULD be a good IF you gave me a bike for Christmas." But then he thought that might not be the best approach either. So, he went out for a walk to clear his head. After a while he came upon a house with a statue of the Virgin Mary. He looked for a moment, then quietly crept up, stole the statue, ran home, and stuffed it under his bed. Then he wrote a new letter, "Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, you better send me a new bike for Christmas."

Thievery and extortion are quite the opposite of what Christmas is all about. Christmas is about sharing, not stealing. This is the season when we're all invited to remember that "it is better to give than to receive." Yet we are also living at a time where it feels like something has been lost or stolen from all of us, and that is joy—real, true, unmitigated joy. Where is the joy? We are living through the third winter of a global pandemic, in a year that has seen the loss of rights for women, and far more violence than any society should have to bear. There have been 611 mass shootings this year, the worst year ever recorded. 1,094 people have been killed by police in this year, which is the most since they've been keeping count. The rate of inflation is higher than it has been in 40 years, which means Christmas more expensive this year than it has been in my entire lifetime—falling most heavily on the poorest of the poor. And we are in the middle of a massive housing shortage, which is giving new meaning this year to the phrase "there was no room for them at the inn." Where is the joy? What does it mean to speak of joy at a time like this? Can there even be joy when there is so much loss, so much pain, and so much sorrow?



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We are hanging lights, decorating houses, putting up trees, buying gifts, wrapping presents, listening to holiday music, yet there are many among us who will not be having a “Merry Christmas” this year. People who have lost husbands, wives, spouses, mothers, fathers, children, and friends. People who have lost marriages, jobs, relationships, houses, livelihoods, security, and stability. People who have lost connections, communities, and comrades. Where is their joy? What does it mean for them to speak of joy this year? Can they even have joy at a time like this?

The marketing departments of large retail corporations would have us believe that joy is not only here, but as easy to access as the click of a button. Macy’s promises we can “Find Joy” by downloading their new app for easier shopping. A Frito-Lay holiday campaign features a group of snow people who sneak inside a house in pursuit of chips and soda. One snowman nearly clashes with a group of people walking in the front door, but successfully escapes only losing his carrot nose, which (thanks be to God) is replaced with a single Doritos chip, at which point we hear the words, “Share More Joy.” [Commercials sound insane when you describe them out loud].

Amazon may have the strongest argument about joy to contend with this year, as they created a heartwarming story of a family who recently lost their mother, leaving the father and his daughter alone for Christmas. The daughter has become deeply attached to a snow globe, which at first frustrates the father until he realizes it represents her mother, his wife. So, the father buys a paper shredder on Amazon, borrows some box fans from the neighbors and surprises his daughter by making a life-sized snow globe in the back yard that brings a giant smile to her face. As the music fades out, we see the Amazon logo and three words on the screen, “Joy is made.” So, Amazon is not going to say that joy is something they think you can buy. That’d be too blunt, too crass. Instead, they want us to image that joy is something we are able to make with supplies that we buy from Amazon, a subtle difference. But is that really joy or is it something else?

It is astonishing how many different feelings or emotions we confuse and conflate with joy. Around the holidays, the feeling that is most often masquerading as joy is pleasure. There’s nothing wrong with pleasure. Lord knows when so many of us are experiencing grief or pain of one kind or another in our bodies and minds that pleasure is a way to bring balance into our lives and dilute the pain. Almost everything being bought and sold to us at Christmas is about some kind of pleasure, gratification, satisfaction, contentment, or amusement, and we need these things in our lives, but we have to understand that they are not joy.



We also find ourselves confronted by a more enduring pleasure called happiness that is a poor substitute for joy. While it lasts longer than pleasure and is important part of our well-being, happiness is still a fleeting feeling that comes and goes like the weather with the seasons of our lives. That's because happiness is based on external factors like what is happening to us or occurring in the world around us. It disappears when suffering, pain, sadness, arrive. Yet suffering is a reality of life, and it is impossible, regardless of how much money, power, or intelligence we have, to orchestrate a life that is completely free from the interruption of pain, which makes happiness elusive and unreliable friend.

In 2011, I was called from my first pastorate in Alexandria, VA to my second in Cary, NC and I was very excited about a move that would bring me back to NC, closer to my family, and offer me the opportunity to use my gifts in a brand-new setting. But one of the ministers on our staff did not react to my news very well. They were grieving and upset. Even though church leaders had offered them the opportunity to help the congregation through this time of transition, they were unable to receive it. I'll never forget the day this minister came into my office with the offer from the church, ripped it up in front of me, and threw it on the ground. I was stunned, hurt, and deeply disappointed. Their reaction to my departure was making it harder for me to leave.

Frustrated, I called my friend Donovan who is a gay Pentecostal man. I did not know gay Pentecostal men existed before I met Donovan, but they do! I called him about the situation and I'm sure I was complaining about it, when he stopped me and said, "Pastor, don't you dare let them steal your joy." His words pierced through my frustration straight to my bones, which is why I still remember it like it happened yesterday. "Pastor, don't let them steal your joy!" Have you ever felt like someone, or something stole your joy?

I have friends who were recently engaged, and I imagine they'd feel like their joy had been stolen if they found themselves in the situation Joseph did. Engagements are supposed to be a time of celebration. We send photos. We post on social media with the words, "She said 'yes!'" or "He said 'yes!'" We show off a beautiful ring. We send out invitations to parties. Engagements are supposed to be a time of joy. I imagine Joseph and his family were celebrating the news of Joseph's proposal. They'd likely told the entire town of Bethlehem. It might have been a little town with dark streets shining and all that, but I bet everybody knew, and you can be sure that people were celebrating.



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Can you imagine how quickly the celebrations ceased and Joseph's joy vanished when he found out that Mary was pregnant? Honestly, it might have been easier for Joseph had it been another man—the milkman, a shepherd, a Roman soldier. But the Holy Spirit? I imagine Joseph thinking, "What kind of fool do you think I am? Just tell me the truth, not some cockamamie story about God!" Matthew tells us everything we need to know in one swift sentence, "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly." It was going to be an admirable but tragic end to a joyous engagement, yet just as Joseph resolved to do this an angel appeared and changed everything.

The spiritual instructions I received from Donovan in 2011, "don't let them steal your joy," was a watershed moment for me, because from that moment on I no longer thought of joy as something we need to search for or try to make with stuff we buy on Amazon, or the pleasure we find from food or drink, or the pursuit of happiness or property that our founders proclaimed was one of our "inalienable rights." Instead, I began to understand joy as a spiritual resource every single human being—all of us already possess in our hearts and souls. We don't have to go find it or make it because we already have it. Joy is not something out there in the world somewhere that we have search for like buried treasure. Like a song from Sunday School, the joy, joy, joy, joy is down in my heart--where? Down in my heart—where? Down in my heart to stay." A friend of mine recently said, "Joy is not a happy face, or the color yellow, it is what is on the inside that no one can take away. Joy is returning to the memory of who we already are with gratitude for the life we already have."

There's a song written by "The Queen of Gospel," Shirley Caesar, titled *This Joy I Have*. It goes like this, "This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away." I don't care what anybody says, this song is a Christmas Carol and every one of us should be singing it during the holiday season and teaching our children and grandchildren to sing it as well. Joy is something the world can't give us, and that the world can't take away. That is the real, true, unmitigated joy. Joy is not going to be found in a box under the Christmas tree, because its already here, in our hearts and our souls and we must remember it, to resource it, and reclaim it. The world can't take away our joy or steal it from us, but that doesn't mean Donovan was wrong. Our joy can be taken, but only if we allow it to be. The world can't take it, but we can surrender it, we can neglect it, we can forget about it, we can pretend it doesn't exist, we can live like there is no joy in our hearts or our souls, and whenever we do that, we lose sight of ourselves and our most powerful resource for our existence in this world.



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At the age of four, Malidoma Somé was removed from his Dagara community in West Africa and taken into a Jesuit boarding school where he was indoctrinated with a Western education and forced to convert to Christianity. He endured sixteen years of physical and emotional abuse by the priests at the school, including losing touch with his tribal language, customs, culture, and religion before finally escaping and running away back home to his village. Somé's return and integration into the traditional tribal religion and customs of the Dagara people was extremely difficult, due to his long absence from his culture. Elders in the village believed Somé's ancestral spirit had withdrawn from his body and that he had passed into the white world by learning how to read and write. Despite this, they agreed to let him undergo an initiation ritual.

Having been raised outside of the culture and not speaking the language made this month-long process, believed to unite soul and body, more dangerous for him than others. Yet he survived initiation by returning to himself, remembering his name and his language, and rediscovering his purpose in the world. The Dagara people believe we are each given a unique purpose and a name that reflects our purpose. Malidoma means "friend of the enemy and stranger," and through initiation Somé remembered that his name and purpose was to share African culture with the West.

Joseph's name means, "God will provide," which is exactly what the angel told him in the dream. The angel reminded Joseph who he was and helped him remember his purpose. And at the same time, the angel also told him what his son's name and purpose would be. He will be called Jesus or Yeshua, which in Hebrew means the deliverer, the liberator, the savior. But that was not his only name and purpose. In addition to being the liberator, Jesus would also be Emmanuel, which means "God with us"—a name and a purpose, a purpose which is a name. The name and purpose of Jesus are united forever across time and space—Emmanuel is Yeshua and Yeshua is Emmanuel. From Exodus to Easter, "God with us" means liberation, and liberation means God is with us. This is why joy is a name. Joy is Emmanuel. Joy is Yesuah. Joy is liberation. Joy is God with us. Joy is salvation. Joy is inside us. Joy is deliverance. Joy is the kingdom in our hearts. Joy is freedom. Joy is the Spirit residing in our souls. Joy is remembering our name and living our purpose. Joy is the divine identity given to us by God that nothing can take away. Joy is our name and a purpose that has been given to us by the God who is always with us and within us.



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What is your name? What is your purpose? What is your reason for being? What is your joy? The world can take a lot of things from us. The world can take our jobs, our money, our marriages, our homes, our mothers, our fathers, but it cannot take our joy. The world can take our children, our family, our friends, our fortunes, our freedom, even our lives, but it cannot take our joy. It cannot take our joy unless we allow it to. So, I hope you will consider Donovan's advice this Advent season and "Don't let anyone steal your joy!" Protect your joy. Defend your joy. Guard your joy. Shield your joy so it can shine brightly and burn fiercely even in the harshest pain and deepest sorrow. Keep your joy trimmed and burning and sing the Christmas song that everybody can sing, "This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away."