

*Joy in Believing*  
December 11, 2016  
Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10  
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When I was 7 years old, I went to a birthday party for Karen O'Leary, and met a girl who soon became my best friend, Kristi. Kristi was deaf, which means she couldn't hear, and I had been wearing glasses for years already, which meant I couldn't see. On the way home from the McDonald's birthday dinner, together Kristi and I sat in the way back of the station wagon, back when there were no seat belt laws. It was really dark, and Kristi could only "hear" me by reading my lips. We developed a really close bond that night in the way back.

You could say she helped open my eyes and I helped unstop her ears. This is how God showed up for us. God brought us together. I couldn't see and she couldn't hear but together we were strong and unconquerable and our disabilities became meaningless compared to the abilities of our kindred spirits. It was a happy moment, and throughout these many decades since, our friendship has brought sustaining joy.

Joy and happiness are a bit like what we discussed a couple of weeks ago, hopes and dreams. They are similar, but have a subtle and nuanced difference. Though the difference between joy and happiness can be disputed, some psychologists claim that happiness is dependent upon outside circumstances; it is situational and the effects are temporary. Joy is a constant wellspring drawn from within, and is not dependent upon outside circumstances.

For example, I may not be happy when I lose a game, but I can be joyful that I played and for the relationship with my teammates. I am not happy when members of the church die, but I have joy when they do, because I know that their souls are with God, and that they have no pain, and are at peace.

The passage today from Isaiah was written to give hope to the Jewish exiles who were feeling displaced and discouraged living in Babylon. They had been conquered by the Babylonians and forced from their homeland of Judah in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The passage is meant to remind them, and to remind us, that God shall bring saving, blossoming, everlasting joy to the deserted places in our lives.

To the weak, the feeble and the fearful, the passage says to be strong; God will come and save you. The disabled shall be made whole, as water bursts forth from the thirsty land and the burning sand. The Holy Way for the redeemed shall bring everlasting joy and an end to sorrow.

What is this Holy Way, this protected highway that the exiles -- that we -- are to travel to return home to restoration and wellness, and everlasting joy? Is it like a lottery ticket, where we suddenly win it all, and live happily ever after?

Interestingly, researchers have studied those who win the lottery and have found that people who win are actually no happier than those who don't. Studies have found that acquiring money, education, a big house or an expensive car do not affect happiness levels as much as we might expect. Enjoying a high quality of life does not depend on money and material comfort because worldly comforts fulfill a desire for the temporary feeling of happiness but do not necessarily bring an inner, constant joy.

Joy is the result of feeling connected to others – to people, to nature, to God, and of accepting life as it is in the present. We are inevitably faced with challenges in life: financial devastation, becoming ill or disabled, a divorce, or death of a loved one can bring upon tremendous grief and sadness. There are techniques and behaviors that people can practice to experience joy even in the midst of suffering, because joy is not based on something positive happening in life, but is an attitude of the heart or spirit. With certain practices and resulting attitude shifts, the inescapable trials of life can be viewed as opportunities to learn and grow.

Everyone can develop inner joy. Certain practices bring on temporary happiness, and practicing frequently throughout the day, over time and on a daily basis, helps to develop inner and consistent joy. Here are just 6 practices among many that have been shown to create lasting joy when practiced regularly:

1. Choosing to smile and consciously deciding to have a good day.
2. Meditation and mindfulness – living life in the present moment, taking time to notice one's own breath.
3. Recognizing the simple delights in life. Like maybe the color of a tree, or the feeling of sweet warmth flowing down your body when you take a sip of hot chocolate.
4. Being grateful – gratitude has a snowball effect: when we practice giving thanks, it becomes a habit, so we live in a state of wholeness instead of deficiency.
5. Noticing your immediate surroundings and their positive aspects: Stop and ask: "What is pleasurable about this moment?"
6. Supporting a worthy cause; helping others is empowering

It is no wonder that research shows that having a religious belief helps people cope with the stresses and strains of life, because the practice of religion encompasses all of these behaviors. And it's no wonder that Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to the children and that no one can enter the kingdom except as a child, because these behaviors are ones that children in healthy environments do naturally. Children are naturally joyful.

The New Testament passage read by Colton reminds us to have patience. The beauty of the 2 passages together is that the New Testament passage of James

reminding us to have patience, and the Old Testament passage of Isaiah assuring us that the desert will bloom, is like Jesus' coming.

The Jewish people were promised a Savior and they waited a very long time. Hundreds of years! In Advent, we are waiting for Christmas to celebrate Jesus' birth, and also waiting for the time that Jesus will be coming back as he promised. As we say in *Compassionate Kids*, *Advent is looking back to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.*<sup>[1]</sup><sup>[2]</sup><sup>[SEP]</sup> *Advent is looking ahead to Jesus' rule one day.*<sup>[1]</sup><sup>[2]</sup><sup>[SEP]</sup> *Advent is looking into our hearts for Jesus' presence there.* In Advent, then, we look back to the past, ahead to the future, and within to the present. And we all say, "Come, Lord Jesus."

When we believe in God and God's promises, like the image of the desert in bloom, we have continual joy inside us. The joy in believing is that while we remember and wait for God's promises we are sustained with strength and a real-live and tangible hope. There is going to be a day when there is no more sorrow and sadness; in the meantime, be strong and do not fear. God is coming to save you. Like my best childhood friend, Kristi -- I felt heard by she who could not hear, and she felt seen, by me who could not see. This is the strength of the Lord, the strength we have in one another, the strength we have in relationship, when the weak are made strong.

Where can you find joy this week, despite difficult circumstances? The good news today is that believing in God brings joy that transcends time and circumstance. Thanks be to God, for delivering us from our darkness and despair, from the desert places in our lives which ultimately bloom in bounty.

Let us rejoice and not prolong the waiting any longer, as we celebrate now the baptisms of Tyler and Ryan Green!