

Monday evening a few of us went to Carl Levin Park to hand out free hot cocoa and invite people to our Christmas Eve service. We used those invitation cards that say, “Find Joy this Christmas.” One young man came to the table, and we entered a conversation about church and Jesus. In that conversation he asked, “So what’s the word for today?” I said, “Joy,” and then proceeded to talk about how we overly focus on happiness and miss true joy. I said that joy is something that comes from knowing God and that it may or may not coincide with feeling happy. Then he asked, “So does that mean if I don’t feel joyful I don’t have God in my life?”

For the past three days, Pastor Jeff has written about rejoicing – about our very appropriate response of joy in this season when we celebrate the coming of Christ into our world. But what if we don’t feel joyful? What if instead we feel anxious, sad, or even angry? What if we’re nowhere near rejoicing right now? Does that indicate a lack of God in our lives?

Last night, we held our Blue Christmas service at the church (and FUMC Belton held theirs on Sunday). These are never highly attended services, but they are one of my favorite parts of the Advent/Christmas season. Blue Christmas is where we bring our hurting, not-so-joyful selves and seek comfort, healing, courage, and hope in Christ in community with others. Blue Christmas is where we acknowledge the realities of pain, grief, fear, anger, and even hopelessness into which the Christ came. It’s where we acknowledge that those are not just realities for “them,” but for us. Christ came for us. All of us. Each of us.

I pondered the young man’s question. Then I said, “No. The great thing about God is that He supersedes our feelings and is always with us no matter where we are. Joy may not be obvious now, but it is there, and so is God. Even when we don’t feel it – even when we don’t feel Him.”

Later I thought about Mary and all of the feelings she must have experienced at hearing God’s plan for her life. Scripture says her initial response was fear, then doubt, and eventually joy. I wonder what happened after her encounter with the angel and her beautiful response of joy – you know, when the realities of God’s plan set in over the coming months:

- The looks, stares, explanations, behind-the-back whispering she would endure
- Riding very pregnant for miles on a donkey
- Finding no room at the inn
- Giving birth to a child – in a manger – in the midst of livestock

Surely Mary experienced moments, even days, when her joy was hard to find. Surely she had moments of fear, of wishing she could just be normal, of grieving the loss of the life she had imagined, and maybe even of anger that God put her in this position.

In those times, maybe she relied on the words of the prophet Nehemiah, who said,

“...the joy of the Lord is your strength!” (Neh 8:10).

Or perhaps the Psalmists words encouraged her to keep going: “Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:5)

She may even have thought about poor old Job, who really knew about suffering, and let the words spoken to him comfort and encourage her:

“He will once again fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouts of joy. (Job 8:21)

Perhaps those words of God can do the same for you.

Christmas is only a few days away. As we await the Advent of God’s Son, the Christ, the Liberating King, let us rest in the assurance that he came to liberate us from the need to manufacture feelings of happiness and to free us to truly rejoice no matter our circumstances – just as Mary did.

“We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.” (Romans 5:3-5 – NLT)

O Come All Ye Faithful – God is with you – So is joy,
Pastor Jannette