

2020 Advent: Joy in a Joyful God

When you think of God's character, what do you think of? "God is love" (1 John 4) is probably a verse that pops into our minds, hopefully. "Powerful" might be another, along with various other adjectives. But somewhere in our minds maybe "stern" comes up. Some would classify him as "angry," I bet.

Throughout the scriptures you see no shortage of complexity to God and his feelings. He mourns, he grieves, he rejoices. You see it all, from love to hate, yes that is in there, too – from Proverbs 6: There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood..."

And we can also have this misconception that God is different in the Old Testament. "He's so mean and law-driven then, but now Jesus is kind and caring and would never say anything harsh." It's the same God folks. There is beautiful Gospel in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New says some really harsh things about millstones, white-washed tombs, and "depart from me I never knew you."

Because God, the same unchanging God, hates evil and takes it head on. He will not let it go unpunished and that's bad news for us, because, let's face it, we've done some evil.

Thanks be to God, our God is also a God of love who takes our place and punishment that we might be forgiven and free. But to what end!? Why does God go through all the trouble? For us, sure. Such is his love. But why? He doesn't need cheerleaders, he doesn't need servants, what motivation would he have for not just wiping the evil out, us included, and being done with it? What motivation would he have for enduring generation after generation of wickedness, cruelty, lust, and selfishness? What motivation would he have for arguing with the pharisees, being so stern in the face of false teaching, for being rejected, lied about, killed?

Unexplainable love is one answer, and a true one! But today I want to put forward one more motivation: Joy. Our verse from last week – Hebrews 12:2 “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Joy was set before him, joy in victory over evil, but he could have had that anyway without saving you. Which means he also has joy in eternity with you. He doesn't need your service, he doesn't need your cheerleading, but you better believe he wants to celebrate life with you! And if it was just you, not all of us, he would do the same.

So last week we explored how the Christian has joy in knowing the end of the story. This week I put forward this premise: *The Christian has joy because they have a joyful God!* Not just stern, angry, but joyful.

I knew a Pastor who had a policy at weddings. He only stayed for one hour at the reception afterward. Why? So after he left, the people could have a good time. I have a sneaking suspicion it had a lot to do with him just wanting to go home, but I think there was some truth to it as well. I can honestly say there have been a couple of crowds I've been in where I felt a bit out of place wearing a clerical collar. Are Pastors just killjoys? Or even more: Is God just a killjoy?

I suppose it depends on your idea of a good time. So let's address that briefly if we may. Throughout confirmation one of my goals is to attempt to hammer into the skulls of the youth that the commandments are not so we can't have any fun, but just the opposite, so we can have fun. Is it fun having the conversation with your new boyfriend or girlfriend about the exes you dated and how far you went with them? Awkward just thinking about it. God gives us a 6th commandment to spare us some of that, not to mention the diseases, broken hearts, and broken homes that come with it. Is it fun to party so hard you are sick the whole next day, or fighting addiction and broken relationships because you've gone too hard for too long? So the Lord gives us a fifth commandment, lets take care of each other and ourselves physically. Will it be fun on the last day to stand before the Judge, sweating

bullets, and your only plea is, “I’m a good person I didn’t kill anyone!” So the Lord gives us the first commandment. You want joy, joy eternal? Worship the One who gives life eternal.

So if your idea of a good time brings harm to others with unchecked crudeness, wanton lust, violence, or substance abuse, then perhaps God is a killjoy and so are we pastors. But I think I would phrase it another way, because it isn’t the pastor or God who is going to kill that joy, those things you think are so fun, they are going to kill the joy for you eventually. When you are too broke, heartbroken, or sick to continue in them.

This is why God seems so stern all the time, it’s because he is addressing abject evil and will respond accordingly. The most joyful person in the world isn’t going to laugh when they step on a lego at midnight. God isn’t going to chuckle at evil, give it a pass, or act like it is a good thing when there are lies being told in his name or people being hurt. In these narrow, specific instances, he *will* act accordingly. But that does not deny his joyful nature that begins to come out as we search the scriptures broadly.

So perhaps we can let the God who is so emotionally complex, who made us as emotionally complex creatures, perhaps we can let him define a good time for us. And I don’t think it’s as depressing as you might think. At least 5 parables feature

a party or banquet of some sort. Including the prodigal son who spoiled all his inheritance on his version of a good time and realized it wasn't such a good time after all. So his father throws him a party that is truly joyful. Jesus himself attends the festivals yearly with his family, and dines with sinners at the tax collector Levi's house. And of course we cannot forget the disaster averted when a wedding runs out of wine, and our Lord lets the celebration continue. Is that permission to be wantonly drunk? No, but you don't get the sense he was stingy either.

So what do we see? The parties of God celebrate faithful love, we see that at the wedding feasts. They celebrate people being brought into the kingdom, we see that with Levi the tax collector and the prodigal son. They celebrate the work of God, we see that at the Passover meal. They celebrate victory over evil, we see that as the armies return from battle. They celebrate reunion and family. They celebrate the harvest (the feast of booths in the Old Testament), they celebrate the Jubilee (the year off for the land and workers), they celebrate sabbath rest. They center around food, drink, and song. They use cloaks, branches, and even dancing. Perhaps our God is not opposed to a good time.

If we go even broader and look at all the scriptures. The word Rejoice shows up 202 times in the Bible, Joy 203, and joyful 25. I think he's OK with telling us to have joy.

If we go broader and look at the creation made by our Lord, not just us. But the quarks and atoms that dance and push and pull; the cell – so intricate, but so ordered; the fish with their schools and colors and jumps and dives; the birds that ride the wind and nest in the trees. Look at the waterfalls, the sunset, the stars and galaxies so vast – so unnecessary – but why wouldn't God stretch his hand wide and far. We see a joyful creator.

And he gave us the creation to live in, to have dominion over, to explore. Quite honestly, we must confess that He's the One who got this whole party started, what a poor guest we would be to be sulk our way through it without a passing glance at its goodness and wonder.

Again, this doesn't mean we have to fake it and be "happy" all the time. Joy is deeper than just happiness. It means we know we are part of a broken creation but one that has been redeemed in Jesus and will be made new. So Paul says, Romans 12:15, "We weep with those who weep." But let us not forget he calls us in the same verse, "To rejoice with those who rejoice!" Yes, Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 3, "there is a time to weep, a time to mourn." But there is also, in that same verse, "A time to laugh a time to dance!" We are complex beings with complex emotions, we don't deny that. Even as our creator is complex as well. He weeps over Jerusalem, he is angry as he clears the temple, he is depressed in the garden, he is in pain and suffering as he died. But he is Risen! And he did all of

that so you might join him at the feast, at the party! And because of what he has done, and his claim on us in baptism, we can be confident we will be there one day. So rejoice! Your God is joyful, and he finds joy in saving you!