

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

Nehemiah 8:9-10

Philippians 4:4-7

Now let's turn to our reading from Nehemiah. I'll explain the context of this short passage in a moment.

Nehemiah 8:9-10

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

We live in challenging times, don't we? It may seem a bit odd, or even incongruous to talk about joy, with everything going on in our world, including our nation. Yet, when we study the topic of joy and the practice of rejoicing, in the Bible and throughout history, we find joy as an important—and I would even say essential—practice of God's people in *any and every time and circumstance*, and not just when things are bright and easy.

For example, it might help us to remember that when the New Testament was written, it was written to Christians who were experiencing the beginnings of

intense and violent persecutions. So, when the apostle Paul says in 1Thessalonians 5:16-18, "*Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus,*" he was not writing to people in comfortable suburbia, but to people who were under threat of being unjustly accused of crimes and jailed and publicly tortured for no reason except that Caesar was threatened by them because they claimed *Jesus Christ* as Lord and not Caesar as Lord.

Now, before I fully dive into this topic of joy, I want to say that I'm not going to presume to tell anyone how they are supposed to feel; I'm not going to tell you "Don't worry be happy;" or, "Let's all cheer up, everything will be fine." I do have hope, and there are signs of positive changes being made for the future. I think our society is on the brink of gaining traction on needed conversations and actions about everything from climate change to racial healing and justice. But it's a bumpy ride right now, and probably will be for a while, and we are riding a roller-coaster of emotions and thoughts, which is normal. So, we need to be realistic about where we are and what's going on, and what we each are feeling and how we are experiencing what's going on.

And remember, we're still in the process of working through a collective trauma response with this pandemic, and when you add the intensity of all the issues that are before us, we all need to give ourselves, and others, permission to feel what we are feeling, and what they are feeling. We need lots of grace!

Yet it is possible, and even necessary for us to practice rejoicing, and to have and express joy, in the midst of whatever we are feeling at the moment. After all, joy is second on the list of the fruit of the Spirit, and it is one of the most prevalent themes in the bible:

It's in Paul's admonition to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice!" from our reading in Philippians. Again, he is writing to people experiencing persecution. It's in Psalm 100 (our call to worship this morning): "Make a joyful noise to the Lord."

Isaiah blesses God's people with these words—and this is spoken to people in exile, which was anything but a happy and prosperous time: "*You shall go out with joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will break forth before you, and there will be shouts of joy.*" That song is at the end of our service this morning! God gives them this song as a sign of hope, of things to come. So they can rejoice *now*, because God is at work, preparing for them a hopeful future.

Nehemiah encourages God's people with these words: "*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*" I'll talk about that passage, and the Nehemiah story specifically, in a moment.

Almost all of the great saints and pilgrims throughout history identified joy as central to the Christian life. For example, Brother Lawrence, in his little book *Practicing the Presence of God* said: "Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God."

South African bishop Desmond Tutu authored a book titled *The Book of Joy* in which he stares into the abyss of despair and difficulty in the world and finds joy as the way out, and the way forward.

Mother Teresa once said that if you want to proclaim Christ to your non-Christian friends and family, do it by showing forth your joyfulness; show that your faith in Christ brings joy and gladness to *your* life. And along that line, to piggyback on last week's theme of being saints... in the Roman Catholic Church, to be canonized as a saint, among the list of qualifications for sainthood there has to be proof of joy in the candidate during their life. I'm glad that at least the Catholic church recognizes that dourness is not a virtue.

What all of this tells us is: *Joy is ours, because it's a fruit of the Spirit... and at the same time, joy is a choice.* The Holy Spirit's gift to us is to provide joy; and at the same time, our part in receiving that gift is to say yes to it; to consent to it. So, the joy that comes from the Spirit is ours, but it's also something to choose—or maybe a better way to look at it is: joy is in us through the giving of the Holy Spirit, so we simply need to let it loose; let it off leash.

Therefore, because joy is something we have, and can choose to turn loose, true Christian joy is not dependent upon our feelings or on our circumstances, but on what God has **said about us** and **what God has done for us**, and **what God has given us**. What God has **said** about us is that we are his children, we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that God is on your side; you are loved, unconditionally. And joy is based on what he has **done for us** in Jesus Christ in accomplishing salvation. And joy is based on what he has **given** us, through his Spirit, like unconditional love, all the blessings of life for which we give thanks. Again...

Joy is ours, and it's a choice. “Rejoice in the Lord always” isn't a nice suggestion. It's phrased as a command, as is the call to worship from psalm 100 to “Make a joyful noise.” These are phrased as a command, but it's a command with a smile 😊. And it's something we can choose, even if we're having a bad

day, or find ourselves in one of those valleys of life for a time. We can have joy, even when life is penciled in, tenuous, difficult right now. We don't have to have all the bills paid, all our work done, or our body in perfect health. Joy comes from knowing, and trusting, that God is with us, and that we are loved unconditionally by the creator of the universe.

Joy is ours, and it's a choice.

For a good contemporary example of rejoicing in any and every circumstance... Pastor Danny Givens, an African American pastor in Minneapolis, shared a heartfelt message last year following a memorial service for George Floyd. Rev. Givens wanted people to “understand that grief, anger, and black joy are hard to separate.” He shared that at funerals of black Americans, including young people killed because of gun violence or brutality or other preventable causes, expressions of black joy are common. He said, “This is not ‘joy’ in the ordinary sense of the word. This is the communal performance of resistance and resilience through dancing and rhythmic movement. Funeral car doors fly open, music is thumping, and the community dances its defiance of death, and the society that produces it. We are angry, we are grieving, we are performing black joy as a sign of our determination to survive.”

Here is a great example of how we can learn from black Americans' experience. Joy, and rejoicing in the Lord, takes on a new and different meaning in that context and in their experience.

I'd like to turn our attention for a moment to the Nehemiah passage ("*the joy of the Lord is your strength*"). There is an important story behind these words: the Israelites had just returned to Jerusalem after their decades-long exile in Babylon. The Babylonians had conquered them and the majority of Israelites were exiled to a foreign land and held in captivity. So, 70 years has passed and now they are back in Jerusalem, which had been ransacked and destroyed by the Babylonians—the entire city had been levelled to the ground. The prophet Jeremiah describes this destruction and laments it in, well, the book of Lamentations.

And upon their return to Jerusalem, their first act of restoration is to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem so they will be protected from enemies, so they can rebuild the city inside, which included rebuilding the temple.

While they are rebuilding the wall, they are recommitting themselves to God, especially to following the Torah (their law), because they know it was their complacency and violation of God's will that got them into the mess of

destruction and exile in the first place. And as they hear the words of the Torah they weep, openly. They feel *their* responsibility, and they understand the responsibility of their ancestors.

And as they turn their attention to the task of rebuilding, Nehemiah tells them: the time for weeping is complete; it's time now to let God's joy strengthen you for the task ahead, of rebuilding.

And it's interesting: read through the rest of chapter 9 of Nehemiah, and chapters 10 and 11, and you see the people doing three things, in this order: **first**, they celebrate the feast of booths, or tabernacles. This commemorates the wilderness wanderings after the Exodus, and how God provided for them in the wilderness. It helped them remember who they were, where they had come from, and how God had provided for them.

Then (second) they confess their sin openly and honestly and *corporately*, in a national confession of sin, as a people. And they make their confession by retelling their story: here is what we did. And they got specific about what they did in their wrongdoing: Lord, you were faithful, we were unfaithful. You did this, but we did this. *And they commit to changing their ways.*

Then (third) they make a covenant, an agreement of faithfulness to God, and they sign on the dotted line. And once they do that, then God's blessing begins to open up for them.

This Nehemiah story is a remarkable story surrounding the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. But what was really rebuilt *was the people's faith*. Their trust in God. That's the real rebuilding project here: their faith. And it began with the words: *the joy of the Lord is your strength*. After a time of weeping and confession, he says, don't let the present mess around you get you down, or worries about the future get you down. It's time to rebuild! God is faithful, God will strengthen us, so... let's get to it.

And if we're in a time when we're rebuilding our life, say, after loss or tragedy or a failure of some kind, or after addiction; or if we're rebuilding a family, or rebuilding an organization, and maybe even a country, this story is one of the most helpful biblical stories: remember who we are and where we came from; confess our part, openly and honestly: these are our problems; we own them and we know that things need to change if we want to move forward; and then recommit ourselves to trusting in God's faithfulness—and let God's **joy** carry us forward.

Let God fill us with joy today, and with *hope* for the future. “Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, God’s own dear presence to cheer and to guide, strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow... Great is your faithfulness.” That hymn is next in the order of worship this morning. And, that hymn is based on a passage in the book of Lamentations, by the way. It’s a great example of rejoicing in God’s faithfulness in the midst of lament and loss.

Because it’s the joy of the Lord that strengthens us, like it did the Israelites. Not our own attempts at finding shiny objects to distract us or fleeting pleasures to consume, but the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, as a fruit of the Spirit. If the Israelites tried to have happiness based on their circumstances, there wouldn’t be much to celebrate. Perhaps the same could be said of us in some of our circumstances. Their joy, rather, was based on what *God* was doing, right then and there, and it strengthened and sustained them. And, the same can be true for us, as we move forward, sustained and strengthened for our future.

This is what Paul says in our reading this morning: rejoice in the Lord always, pray and give thanks, and God’s peace will fortify you.

Now, it’s the “always” part that gets me. Like, “Be joyful *always*, pray *continually*, give thanks *in all circumstances*, for this is God’s will for you in Christ

Jesus.” We might ask, how can I rejoice when things look like a mess in our world and people are struggling (or, I’m struggling)? How can I give thanks when covid19 is still infecting people—even vaccinated people—and we still have to wear these masks indoors? I’ll tell you how... or why. Because God is faithful, we are loved unconditionally, and, things are changing for the better, even if those changes are hidden from our sight for a time. And... this too shall pass.

Heidi said after one of her trips to Rwanda: African people dance, all the time, in any circumstance. They dance when they’re happy; they dance when they’re sad; they dance when they feel exuberant; they dance when they feel depressed; they dance when babies are born; they dance when they are grieving; they dance when they’re hungry and don’t have enough to eat; they dance when they’ve had a good meal. It’s their way to choose joy no matter what, because it’s one way that they can live in the present moment, and tell their bodies that God is with them, and there is still much to be grateful for, even in the midst of difficulty and challenging circumstances. Even in post-genocide Rwanda.

Maybe dancing isn’t your thing—or it isn’t possible for it to **be** your thing! However, maybe it’s going for a walk to get your body to tell your mind and heart to rejoice. That’s one of the things I do at Hamlin Park by our home in Shoreline.

It's just a few blocks away from our house, and when I enter the woods I offload what is burdening me, giving it all to God by giving it to the trees (they know how to turn my carbon dioxide exhalations of blech and turn them into oxygen and make it useful to the planet). And then, when I exit the woods, I leave it all in there. Leave it in the woods and to the wisdom of the trees. (Obviously I'm a firm believer that God works through creation—plants and animals; it's Biblical!)

If walking isn't your thing, maybe it's listening to good music or singing at home (I've added extra singing to our worship services for this very purpose—because it brings us joy); or maybe it's some kind of artistic expression like knitting or drawing, or maybe it's laughing at something humorous (“laughing is like inner jogging”—exercise for our heart and soul). Whatever it is, it helps if it's something that engages your whole self—body, soul and spirit; mind and emotions—in rejoicing.

And, we can always make a gratitude list. And on that list, include the hard and challenging things, and learn to thank God for them too. Because learning to give thanks in *all* circumstances, and not just the happy ones, teaches us to see God at work in every aspect of our lives, and it helps us to grow in our faith, and

as a result we can sing with confidence the great hymn that is next in our worship,

Great is Thy Faithfulness.