

“Christians Feel Joy?”

Luke 1:46-55 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

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I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the name C.S. Lewis. He is the author of the Chronicles of Narnia. He was also probably the most impactful Christian apologist of the 20th century. That is amazing when you consider that his career was as a professor of medieval literature at Oxford University. His Christian writings and “lecturing” he did on the side. We must note the oddity of an Oxford English professor being so vocal about the Christian faith. Lewis was not always a Christian. He entered adult life and his career as you would expect of an Oxford English professor, as a staunch atheist. But at age 31, he bent his knee in his dormitory room and gave in to the God he could no longer deny. Let me tell you what brought about his conversion which he gives account of in his book Surprised by Joy.

When Lewis was a young boy, probably 10 or 11, he was standing in his yard in front of a blooming current bush and he had a memory of a couple of years prior when his little brother Warren showed him his play garden. It was a little tin box filled with leaves, twigs, and moss under the care of a couple of figurines. As this memory flashed into his mind so also was he overcome with Joy. By Joy Lewis did not mean happiness or contentment or pleasure or peace. It was more like a transcendent experience of being lifted above this world into seeing and experiencing wonder in the midst of this world. That experience and several more like it led Lewis on the life's pursuit of finding Joy. This pursuit led him away from the Christian faith. He was raised in the Church of England and could not see how all the dourer pomp and sermonizing about sin had anything to do with Joy. In fact he did not see how God and Joy could be related at all. He searched for Joy in philosophy, in Norse mythology, in religions, and in Paganism but could not find it. This Joy only came to him when it wanted like God in the Garden of Eden saying to Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” Towards his 31st year one afternoon he sat in the upper-deck of a bus and found himself confronted by himself in such a way as to realize that there were things about him that were keeping Joy at a distance. He began to realize that Joy or rather the Giver of Joy had been pursuing him along. He said he began to feel himself melt like snow and trickle away until that fateful evening when in humility he realized he could not deny this God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ any longer. One of his most famous quotes is, “Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side”. Later in

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life he said that after becoming a Christian he forgot about his pursuit of Joy because he had discovered that it was the Giver of Joy that needed all along.

With this being the Third Sunday of Advent and the traditional theme is Joy, I thought C.S. Lewis' testimony a good place to visit. (Oh, by the way, Lewis never fell in love until he was almost sixty. The woman's named also happened to be Joy and damn it all she died of cancer not long after they were married. In fact, Lewis married her knowing she would die within the year. So when he speaks of the experience of Joy we know he means something other than happiness. The movie *Shadowlands* tells this very, very beautiful story.) Back to Joy, I think many of us can relate to Lewis in his question of what does God have to do with Joy, particularly the way Christians talk about God. I was raised Presbyterian in the Bible belt of the Southern U.S. and I never heard about Joy in the context of being Christian. It was all about morality, sin, and believing the right things about Jesus so that you don't go to Hell when you die. The God of the culture I grew up in really was an angry Creator god who had nothing better to do than judge and get people for their sins; that is the people who didn't opt for Jesus. I couldn't accept that god because it seemed that it was me, an innocent little boy, who was having to live with the consequences of the sins of other people whom that god never seemed to want to hold accountable.

There was another God they talked about down there; the God who loved us and sent his Son to die for us on account of our sins. This was the God I found in a little *Good News Bible* that my dad gave me when I was 16, the same year I should have went on anti-depressants. You folks remember the *Good News Bible* with the little stick figure people for illustrations, eh? That Bible and the man who gave it to me talked of a God who gets involved in our lives and loves us and leads us to faith. At age 19 I accepted that God and the Son who died for me and I began to have experiences of the Holy Spirit particularly in worship. And then there was the time when I was 20 or 21 in my college dorm room in a deep moment of grief when it was like some sort of door was opened and in stepped a very certain knowing that I would never be alone because “Emmanuel” – God **is** with us! Indeed with me, too. God had made me like one of those little stick figure people in the *Good News Bible*. He's made us all to be his people. You want to talk about Joy. Prior to that the emotions that defined my inner life were loneliness, depression, anxiety, and unforgiveness and my life's pursuit was just wanting to find someone who would love me. Well, that someone is the God who loves me. If you want to talk about Joy, about wonder, I get that the most when I look at Dana holding little William and he smiles just because he sees me. Then I get overcome with wonder when I see where this God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – has brought me. I know full well what Mary meant when she said, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.”

If you do a search of the word that the NIV here translates as “rejoices” you find that it is being full of joy, extremely joyful because God has done what he said he would do. There is a profound connection between Joy and humble

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gratitude. We feel this Joy because God has acted and we are moved to be thankful. Indeed, we are moved to worship, to glorify God; to say with our hearts, our mouths, our whole lives as Mary has said “My soul glorifies the Lord” – the entirety of my life gives honour to God and makes God not myself great. At the end of the day, and at the beginning of the day, it is Joy that Christians keep coming back to. We can look at our lives, our souls, and give glory to God because we know he has acted for us. When we come to church on Sunday morning we come in Joy to give the greatness to God for his steadfast love and faithfulness to God firstly, as a Christian community and secondly, as individuals.

I say at the end of the day it is Joy that Christians keep coming back to, but... Another way to define Joy is to say what it is not. I popped up the Thesaurus (or the Thesaurus Rex as it is called to people such as myself who are of little vocabulary) on my computer to find antonyms for joy and I compiled a list: sorrow, grief, distress, regret, sadness, worry, melancholy, unhappiness, misery, bitterness, depression, despondency, gloom, wretchedness. These are all feelings that come along with hurt, hate, and unforgiveness; indeed, with bearing the grudge. If at the end of the day we keep returning to these feelings, then we must do as C.S. Lewis did on the upper-deck of that bus. We must confront ourselves with ourselves and accept that there are things about me that keep me from Joy. We need to those things melt away until in grateful humility we can bow our knee before our God saying, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

The Christian faith is about faith, about trust in the living God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who is with us and who loves us and who gets involved in our lives to the effect of surprising us with the Joy of knowing him personally in his steadfast love and faithfulness. We are Christians because God has brought us to this faith, this Joy. God and Joy go hand in hand. You can’t have the one without the other. Anywho, I close this sermon with a question; “At the end of the day, when all is said and done, what do you keep coming back to?” Let it be Joy. Amen.