

“The Gift of Joy”

Luke 2:10-11; 25-35

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One morning last week I was walking through the hall while children were arriving for preschool. I spotted two little boys that were dragging rather slowly, almost half asleep. “Good morning,” I said and got no response. “Merry Christmas, boys,” I exclaimed as I prepared to turn and go into the office. Their faces lit up and both of them said, “Merry Christmas to you!” “This sure is a fun time, isn’t it fellas?” I replied. “Yeah, it sure is and we like it!” they replied.

Children make Christmas special, don’t they? Their sense of joyful anticipation is contagious. However, I am aware that Christmas is not fun for everyone. For some people it is a struggle to celebrate because of worry or grief.

Wasn’t it this way from the beginning? Luke tells us about an angel that appeared to the shepherds with the good news of Christ’s birth. This set off a joyous celebration conducted by a heavenly chorus. There was no shortage of joy that evening.

What was the mood eight days later, though? When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple to be dedicated, a holy man by the name of Simeon greeted them with an alarming message. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too” Luke 2:34-35. This is not what the mother of a newborn wanted to hear! Surely these worrisome words robbed Mary of some of her joy.

This was followed by immeasurable grief in many households sometime later when innocent babies lost their lives because of Herod’s jealous wrath. When the Wise Men did not return to tell Herod where Jesus was, he ordered the slaughter of all children under the age of two. Understandably, grief overshadowed joy throughout the land.

What’s the message for us today from these contrasting stories? Life is a combination of joy and sorrow. The stories surrounding Jesus’ birth remind us that life is a mixture of good and bad, dreams and disappointments, births and deaths. Our own experiences and observations reveal that life is a messy combination of health and illness, marriage and divorce, win and loss, success and failure. At any given moment, there is much for which to be grateful and much to mourn.

To deny either joy or sorrow is unhealthy. Serious repercussions accompany denial. If we ignore the good that is around us, we become morbid, miserable and unpleasant. If we ignore the bad and suppress our grief, they will turn to anger and rage.

So, how do we live with both joy and sorrow, keeping them in balance especially during the holidays, preventing one from overshadowing the other? This is not easy and it is every person’s struggle, but it is a struggle our faith addresses. What does our faith teach us?

Loss is as much a part of life as gain. In their book, Life Lessons, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler refer to loss as the graduate program of life. Eventually, we lose everything around us, treasured possessions, dear friends, and precious family members. Everything here is temporary. “Those dying understand this,” they write, “it’s the living that kid themselves.”

There is an old Jewish saying that if you dance at a lot of weddings, you’ll cry at a lot of funerals. All beginnings have endings. A story I recently read brought this home to me.

It is about one of the author’s of Life Lesson, David Kessler. In the book he shares the intimate details of one of the final conversations he had with his dad whom he loved dearly.

“I don’t know how to say goodbye to you,” David said to his dying father. “I don’t know how to say goodbye to you either,” his father replied. “But I do know that I have to say goodbye

to you and everything I ever loved, everything from your face to my home. I even looked out the window last night and said goodbye to the stars.”

Take my watch off,” the father requested pointing to his wrist. “No, dad, you’ve always worn that watch. I don’t remember you without it,” David said. “But now it is time for me to say good-bye to it, too, and for you to wear it,” his father insisted.

David gently took the watch off and placed it on his own wrist. As his son was looking down at it, David’s father whispered, “You will have to say good-bye to it someday, too.” “That watch has always been a bittersweet reminder of the temporariness of life,” David admitted.

It is impossible to find a world where there is no loss. We like to pretend that we will always have life and the things we have accumulated, but deep down we know we won’t.

So, how do we go through the holidays after we have suffered a great loss? How do we mix and mingle with others when we feel empty, helpless, immobilized, angry, sad and fearful? How do we sing Christmas carols when there is no joy in our spirit and laughter in our voice?

It’s hard; trust me, I know. But I have also come to the conclusion that maybe this is why Christmas comes once a year. It is a part of the healing process that can restore wholeness and bring newness to life.

Kessler says that late one evening he was on the cancer floor in a hospital. He spoke with a nurse that was devastated because she had just lost a patient. “This is the sixth person I watched die this week!” she complained. “I can’t take anymore. I can’t watch loss after loss after loss. It feels too bottomless. I don’t know if it will ever end.”

Kessler asked this nurse if she would take a break and go with him for a few moments. Before she could reply, he gently took her by the hand and took her to another wing of the hospital, the maternity ward. He walked her up to the glass partition that separated them from the newborn babies. He quietly watched her face as she began looking at new life, taking this scene in as if she had never before witnessed it.

“Doing what you do,” Kessler said, “you need to come here often to remind yourself that life is not only about loss.”

Perhaps this is why we need Christmas, especially when we are at our lowest. It gently takes us by the hand and leads us to the maternity wing in the Bible, enlarging our vision and understanding. It helps us to realize that joy has often been closely associated with sorrow, but more times than not, joy has had the final word. “Weeping may remain for a night but joy comes in the morning,” the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 30:5. “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy,” he wrote in Psalm 126:5.

Yes, Christmas reminds us that life is not only about loss, but birth and rebirth. Christmas can give birth to hope with new dreams and relationships because God really is with us as the name of His son, Emmanuel implies. And when it does, we rediscover what we thought we had lost forever, the blessed gift of joy.