

Scripture reference: Isaiah 64:8-9 and Matthew 2:13-14; 19-23

Most of you know that this past week has been a bit difficult for me. It has been filled with the stress that can come with the winter Holiday season; anxiety that can come with reconnecting with estranged family members; chaos that can come with children and grandchildren all gathering under one roof; and the emotions that can come with losing a loved member of the family - for me, my mother's passing last Sunday. Top that off with the excitement and joy of celebrating the birth of God's son, our savior, and I kind of felt like I was stuck in a blender - I think it might still be running but not at such a high speed anymore... This is where the messages of this advent season have been most helpful. Hopeful Joy, Loving Joy, Joyful Joy, Peaceful Joy, and Incarnate Joy - all amazingly beautiful, useful, and belonging to each one of us. And yet, there were times when none of those seemed to settle me. As the activity of this holiday season winds down, I find that this last type of "Joy" that I want to talk about this year (this is our last Sunday for 2019...) is the Joy in which I am finding comfort. That place of quiet rest that is found near to the heart of God, that place of comfort, of full release, that place where all is joy and peace.

How do we get there? How do we find that Quiet Joy? It is all in the story we have been telling for weeks now. It is in the story of the Advent Wreath, which finds its own story in the story of Jesus' birth. This quiet Joy that is ours, gifted by God Himself, begins the moment Jesus was born. It begins with a Song in the Air... Hymn #249 in your red hymnal.

A manger, in a cattle stall, served as the cradle for the Son of God born to Man... a little on the dreary side if you ask me... Not so "Merry and Bright" as sung in many of our Christmas Carols and Christmas Hymns, and yet we sing of a stars light and the voices of Angels... and we read Psalm 30, verse 5: "Weeping may go on all night, but in the morning there is joy." (*Psalm 30:5 The Living Bible*).

When I "look around" through the "night" of my own life, I am sometimes disheartened, and sometimes impressed with myself. Maybe that sounds a little egotistical, and maybe sometimes it is (that human part of me does rear its ugly head from time to time), but I have managed to come through some pretty "dark" times with relatively few scars... What I have learned through my own experiences over the years, and through my study of the life of Jesus, is most eloquently stated by Francis Bacon who said: "In order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present." And in his eloquence, Francis Bacon sounds, to me, rather academic - Sometimes this style of speech works for me and serves as a kind of beginning, and can send me into an amazing world of philosophical and theological thought and prayer. But, sometimes this style of speech catches me in a different frame of mind and I want to say things like: "Just speak the point, I don't want to have to think right now!"... And that's where I find this same sentiment spoken more "realistically" and "in the moment" by Madeleine L'Engle: "Maybe you have to know the darkness before you can appreciate the light." This manner of speaking the truth - a truth we are witness to in the lives of Joseph and Mary as they were becoming parents - can serve as a kind of ending that allows me to just hang onto the sentiment and find comfort. I think that's what happened the night Jesus was born - I mean the purpose of His birth was to thwart the darkness that had enveloped our world - That's the Francis Bacon version; but I think it was the Madeleine L'Engle version that spoke to the Shepherds and Wise Men... That sentiment is found in the Hymn "In the Bleak Midwinter" #221 in your red hymnal.

In gifting our hearts to Jesus, we are the ones given the gift! The greatest gift of all - salvation from this world of greed and hate. A world into which Christ was born as our human brother to see, feel, and experience the darkness that we created for ourselves in order that He might help us see the light that is offered to us by God. The greatest gift of all is not one that anyone of us can give, but has instead been given to us. We have been given life. Life that is gifted every minute of every day to another baby here on earth. It is a life that can hold great sorrow and great joy; heartbreaking and division causing disasters; and miracles of healing and mended relationships. Because of that, the life we lead here may not always be "pretty", may not always seem like such a great gift at all, but as stated by Mastin Kipp, "We have to start viewing not just the good stuff as the miracle, but also the bad stuff that gets you to the miracle. The whole thing is a gift." The whole thing, the good, the bad, and the ugly are all part of the great gift of the light and life of Christ. We simply need to acknowledge; to see, come to know, and accept the gift of Jesus in each one of us. Jesus, the light breaks through our darkness...

Join us now as we sing "Break Forth, O beauteous Heavenly Light" #223 in your Red Hymnal.

"Let this be where new life starts for all who seek and find you..." And now I am back to the beginning, stuck in a blender, but the speed has slowed quite a bit. Chaos, confusion and darkness dissipate with the light of Christ. Finding that light allows us to view our worlds a little differently... the "loud" that comes with having a 1, 2, and 3 year old - awake and in the same room, becomes less loud when we see His light in their bright eyes and smiling faces... the tension of becoming reacquainted with our children who are no longer children seems less difficult when we see Christ in their efforts... And even sadness and depression, the despair of having to say goodbye to someone in this earthly life, has no chance against the light that is found in Jesus.

Despair continues to wage war against hope and peace as I fight to accept the loss of my mother. I know that she is home now. I am grateful that she no longer has to feel the mental and physical pain of her illness. But I miss her.

I am comforted by the words of a friend who shared with me that Mom got to celebrate Jesus' birthday WITH Jesus... makes me a little jealous... and it also helps to let that light back in... That light that is found when we find Jesus Christ - Born to give us Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace that are only found when we let go of the old and find the New. The "New" that is found in the life and light of Jesus Christ born on Christmas Day to be for us the Love of God Himself. We all need to open your hearts and find the comfort, the Quiet Joy, that is offered in the True Love found in the gift of Jesus Christ. AMEN