

2017-12-17 “A Song of Joy” – Michael Cheuk
Psalm 125:1-6

As we continue with our Advent sermon series called “Songs of the Season,” we come today to Psalm 126, which I’ve entitled “A Song of Joy.” It is a song that expresses the hopes and dreams of a people eagerly waiting for something wonderful—their deliverance from captivity—but the time of its fulfillment had not yet arrived. As translated in the New Revised Standard Version, the Psalm seems to suggest that the people are already freed and returned back home. But as literary biblical scholar Robert Alter argues, given the fluidity of the verb tenses in biblical poetry, one can make a case for reading verses one to three using the future tense:

When the LORD restores Zion’s fortunes, we should be like dreamers. Then will our mouth fill with laughter and our tongue with glad song. Then will they say in the nations: “Great things has the LORD done with these.” We shall rejoice.¹

Read in this way, this passage is a visionary expression of joy that culminates with a petition for restoration. This Psalm invites us to live as visionaries, through which the anticipated joy of God’s coming becomes a present reality even amid the distressing circumstances.

We often assume that joy comes only when things go our way and we get what we want. But let me tell you a secret: joy cannot be pursued for its own sake. Those who chase after joy or happiness are sure to miss it. Joy is not the product of **outward** circumstances; it is the by-product of **inner** transformation.

Two years ago, I was in a dark time in my ministry as I struggled with complaints in my last church about my leadership, my inadequate pastoral care for our long-time members, and declining attendance and financial contributions. I met with church leaders, and we set up a plan for me to address those issues. But it became clear to me that no matter what I did to address those concerns, some members would not be satisfied. I realized I was becoming a big distraction to the church. So, at the beginning of December, I told the personnel committee that I was going to announce my resignation the first Sunday in January. But it was crucial that word of my decision did not leak out to the congregation during the Advent season.

There were times when I thought I was a failure, that I was damaged goods, and that no church would want me after this. Yet, throughout those weeks of Advent, as I preached on the experience of God’s people throughout history, I was reminded that I was not alone in the darkness of my pain, suffering and despair. I was reminded that I too was waiting in hope, longing for peace, and anticipating joy.

In those dark days, I also realized that I had a choice. I could choose to see myself as a victim of circumstances and blame others for my predicament, or I could choose to take responsibility for my thoughts and my actions. I asked myself: “What can I learn from this experience that I can use to grow in my leadership ability, and in my ability to provide pastoral care, not only to long-time members but also to new members? Which criticisms lodged against me has a basis in reality, and which do not?”

¹ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), p. 447.

But the two most important questions I asked myself were these:

1. “Who am I, not in the eyes of my critics, but in the eyes of God?”
2. “What is God doing in my life, and what is being birthed within me?”

In the intervening weeks and months, these answers became more clear:

1. I am a beloved child of God, who has called me to be a husband to my wife and a father to my children, before calling me to be a pastor to a congregation.

Joy is not the product of **outward** circumstances; it is the by-product of **inner** transformation. These two realizations gave birth to an inward transformation that has been so helpful to me in the months following my resignation from my former church. I’m beginning to understand that my identity and worth is not based on the titles before my name, the letters after my name, numbers on my paycheck, or what others think about me. My identity and worth is secured in the sight of God because of Christ.

Also, I now see this chapter of my life as an amazing gift from God. I have extra time to be the kind of husband and father I want to be. It’s such a joy to be able to attend Wesley’s soccer games and track meets, to drive down to Richmond and have lunch with Thea, or to welcome Beth home from work with a hot cooked meal. I tell people that I want to treasure the time I have with my family now, because once Wesley goes off to college, no amount of money will be able to buy back the time I have now.

2. God is birthing within me a calling to ministry wider than a local church, where I get the privilege of helping individuals and organizations to live out their true callings.

Secondly, God gave me a vision of a coaching and consulting ministry that is wider than a local church. That emerging vision was partly the reason why I freely chose to step down from my church in order to pursue this vision. Has this journey been a walk in the park? Of course not. There are still moments now when I get anxious about my future. But in the main, my present life has been a joy. My work with faith leaders in Charlottesville through the Charlottesville Clergy Collective has been so life-giving to me. I’m now have friends who are practitioners of many different faiths: Christian pastors – black and white, rabbis, Buddhists, Sufis, Christian Scientists, and many others, working together to promote racial justice in my community.

As with the Psalmist of old, I’m constantly reminded of God’s faithfulness to me in the past. I continue to catch a glimpse of God’s promises to me in the future. In the meantime, I’m being released from the things that bind me into captivity in the present. These things fill me with joy.

Last Wednesday, the Peakland personnel committee took the church staff out for lunch. During the lunch, Debbie Snidow commented on how she likes the way I say “Good morning, Peakland Baptist!” “You bring energy and you always have a smile! ... You...” She paused as she struggled for the right words and then she blurted out: “You are just full of it!”

Well, Debbie is right, I am full of it! I am full of *gratefulness* for the opportunity to minister among you. I'm full of *hope* for the future of Peakland Baptist. I'm full of *peace* because you have been a place of healing for me. I'm full of *love* for the way you have encouraged me and welcomed my family. So, I can't help but smile and laugh, because I'm full of joy. Thank you for allowing me to sing my song of joy in these past several months.

In my conversations with some of you, I've also detected times when members of Peakland Baptist also have sung songs of joy. Oh, I'm not talking about times in the good ole days when the church was bustling with people, and children and young families were filling the pews. No, in fact, the times when I've detected songs of joy were some of the most challenging seasons faced by this church.

The first was during the sickness and tragic death of your pastor Steve McNeely. During that dark and despairing time in the life of Peakland Baptist, the story I hear is that the members of Peakland came together like never before to BE the church for Steve and Suzanne. During that time, there was a unity of purpose and energy. During that time, you knew who you were as a church and each of you played your part to minister to the McNeelys...and to each other.

The second was during the sickness of Hunter Russell. During that time, I heard how you all rallied around the families of Hunter Russell *and* Leslie Willman as she donated her kidney to Hunter. During that time, Peakland Baptist was alive and energized because you all had a cause to live for. Those were NOT "happy times," but it seems to me that those were times when the Spirit of the living God was moving in a powerful way that transformed this congregation. Remember what I've been saying: joy is not the product of **outward** circumstances; it is the by-product of **inner** transformation.

When we are being transformed, we are poised to sing a song of joy. This song of joy that we sing is not a naïve optimism that disregards the broken reality of this world. This song of joy is not a "power of positive thinking" telling us that life will get better if we only look at the bright side. No, this song of joy is a song that is sung in the midst of a broken reality, in the midst of suffering and loss, because it relies on God's power and it sees things from God's perspective. As such, it reminds us of God's presence, which leads us to be grateful for God's provision.

So, I wonder. If I'm correct to think that Peakland Baptist was most joyfully alive and energized when she had a cause to live for, what if Peakland Baptist can intentionally *choose* a *new* cause to live for (instead of just reacting to a tragic situation)? What if Peakland Baptist can be known throughout Lynchburg as a church that pronounces good news to those oppressed by toxic Christianity, to bind up the brokenhearted who have been rejected by their churches because of differences of belief, to proclaim liberty to the captives of religious fundamentalism? When you hear me say that, what are you feeling inside? Can you imagine the joy of those who are looking for such a church as this?

I'm not smart enough to tell you what Peakland Baptist ought to be. But I know that God wants to give birth to something new and joyful here at Peakland. On this third Sunday of Advent, may we sing a song of joy as we wait and anticipate the great things God in Christ will do through us! Amen.