

Isaiah 9:2-6; 12:1-6; Luke 2:10; Matthew 1:18-25  
Advent 3, JOY

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## WEIGHT LIFTING

The topic for the first Sunday of Advent was Hope, and last Sunday, the topic was Peace. We are progressing through Advent with the traditional themes.

Each Sunday's sermon is an attempt to present the key ingredients for achieving / for experiencing the designated topic. There won't be a lot of details, but merely clues / simple directions on how to get there.

Life is a journey: yours and mine to discover and live.

Nevertheless, we all need help; we can't do it alone.

We need insight / guidance / some basic directions..... because life's journey can be difficult.

We need help, and we need to hear some Good News ... along the way.

Today's topic is JOY, and likewise, I will try to give a rudimentary outline / a Biblical counsel for grasping .....Joy.

Joy is very special, as are all the topics of Advent. Joy is a wonderful state of being. It can feel like floating, because central to Joy are the perceptions of release,..... of freedom,.... and of a burden removed.

Joy is much more than relief, excitement or happiness.

Happiness, ecstasy and all those heightened, dopamine charged feeling are nice, but they pale in comparison to Joy.

Joy is a way of being / a state of being. It is more than just a feeling. It is the out-flowing of self and of our burdens.

Joy IS felt, yet more deeply than at the emotional level.

Joy is the well being of the whole self.

Usually, happiness, positive excitement, and so forth.... are feelings that come to us,.... by the way of things / or circumstances. They are rewards / the results of an straightforward outcome.

Often we work for / invest in things and activities that make us happy.

In fact, we humans are infatuated with achieving happiness. We like to feel good. We want to feel the rush of that "high."

For example, we contemplate, fantasize about something we want / something we believe will make us happy. Then we work to make it happen / we work to pull it to us / to make it ours ... which will make us happy. It could be a dream vacation, a special toy, something for the home or whatever we deem that we need, including providing for our children.

We need to satisfy our needs....., and meeting needs can make us happy.

In essence happiness is the result of what comes our way that we believe we need, and that may include having our children be successful.

A sense of “happy” satisfaction can be stimulated... because there is a chemical reaction connected to feeling happy / to feeling good. That chemical is dopamine. Dopamine is a built in reward for doing things that are good for survival. Our brain release dopamine when we eat... so we’ll be sure not to starve. Dopamine is released when we fellowship with each other because we are social creatures. We need each other to survive.

Is it any wonder that we enjoy potluck lunches. A potluck lunch includes food and fellowship; we get a double dose of dopamine, and we like it. : )

In addition, there are a lot of chemicals out there that cause the brain to produce more dopamine, and those chemicals can be abused and they can be addictive.

A month ago, when I was still not quite over my surgery, I pulled a muscle connected with my SI joint, which is in the lower back.

It’s very painful, and since I did it before, I knew it took a while to recover. Moreover, having one kidney prevents me from taking over the counter pain and anti-inflammatory medication. So, I went to the doctor and he prescribed some stuff for me.

The next day, as I was driving home, I was basking in the thoughts of how wonderful life was... and wonderful everybody was... and how ....great..... then I realized that my feelings were a little over the top / they were not natural.

I went home and Googled the medicine I was taking, and learned it was a synthetic opium.

I have an addictive personality, and so I knew I had to stop taking that stuff.

Pity,..... because it was making my back feel better.

Nevertheless, I can clearly understand how people get addicted,... because.... dopamine feels good, and certain drugs seem like an easy way to feel good. How we feel is important to us.

Yet, JOY is more than just a feeling.

Joy is a soul smile.

Joy is not from drugs. It is not from something we get or buy.

Joy is in the soul and in our entire being.

And, .....Joy is from something we give up.

We can understand the concept of joy, but knowledge about joy will bring us Joy.

This sermon will not bring you joy.

Moreover, this sermon is not about getting buff and building up muscles.

The title “Weight lifting” refers to a weight being lifted, and it could be the weight of the world we carry, and.....the weight that affects us the most is our own personal burden / the heaviness that pulls us down... and prevents us from living in joy.

This time of the year, we often hear the cliché, “It’s better to give than to receive.”  
The Child in us, openly nods with agreement when we hear that phrase, yet we’re silently thinking,....  
“Oh, but I sure rather get things than give stuff away.”

I was once involved with overseeing a food pantry.  
During the holidays, there would be a surge in donations to the pantry from the more affluent people.  
They were trying to embrace the platitude that *it is better to give than to receive*, yet they couldn’t quite grasp it. Because, most of the food items that were donated were things that nobody wanted; things that had been collecting dust on someone’s shelf, or stuff that was extra.  
The people in need of food... knew that. They knew how others regarded them; they could tell by the giving.

Mother Teresa said, “If you give what you do not need, then it isn’t giving.”  
Real giving is releasing what is ours/ what we hold as dear to us.  
And, in that concept is the seed for JOY.

There is a close connection between letting go.... and freedom.  
There is a close connection between releasing and redemption.

The Isaiah 9 passage presents people being joyous about being rescued from oppression.  
The picture presented is of a great burden being lifted – redemption!  
And, the image includes the coming of the Messiah– the Prince of Peace.  
Joy is realized in the one who lifts the weight / the burden and brings peace.      Salvation / deliverance is at hand.....

The catch is.... burdens / the weight must be released before it can be lifted,..... and we sure hold onto to a lot of stuff.

The story in the Matthew text is an example on how that releasing / letting go is done.

From the narrative, we learn that Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married, and lo and behold, from NO fault of his own, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant.  
That is a big problem, no matter what century you live in.

It’s easy to embellish this story by imagining some long, into the night, discussions between Mary and Joseph about “her” condition.  
And, we can suppose that Mary tried to tell him that “the child” was from God,..... but I don’t think it went over real well.

In spite of Mary’s seemingly “far fetched” alibis, Joseph did Not seek revenge. There would be NO honour killing.

In fact, he planned to do a very nice thing. Instead of hurting or shaming her, he intended to quietly release her from the engagement so that she could go to her home and secretly have the child.

That was his plan, until an Angel came to him in a dream.  
The angel confirmed Mary's explanation, and..... he believed the angel..... which meant that he had to let go of all aspects of common sense and reason.  
Joseph didn't ask for details or reasons ... or how it was even possible.  
He believed..... and the great burden of assumed adultery and what to do next was released.  
The future was in God's hands.....and Joseph and Mary journeyed on ..... with less weight,..... well she gained weight, but that's a different kind of weight.  
Well,..... maybe not,..... she still had to release that weight to be delivered.....

The point being..... this is an example of releasing / of how to find joy.

Over time, most of us have acquired many burdens– burdens that feel like a heavy weight that we bear. This weight pulls us down, wearies us, drains us..... and stresses us out.

Some of the burden is self inflicted, some of it is imagined,..... most, if not all of it is ours.....because we hold onto to it.

We hold onto to it by trying to control things/ trying to control the outcome.

We hold on to our burdens by assuming we know the answer on how to lighten our load.

And, we hold onto our weight..... because..... nobody will take it away.

An interesting irony can happen to progressive thinkers / to those who have an advanced theology, which is: we tend to worship our theology / we tend to put our faith in our rational, systematic construction of how God and the world works. Instead of God, we trust in our theology.

I don't think we are smart enough to put all the pieces together / to make everything fit.

In other words,..... we need to allow room for surprise / for miracles / for angels in dreams..... for the impossible,.....

.. FOR God to take away our burdens.

I am convinced that joy blossoms in the mystery of God's providence.

Can we ask God to take away our weight?

Can we believe that we can live in joy,..... without controlling how that joy is achieved?

Can we let go..... trusting that a loving God will take care of us.

This isn't logical, it isn't rational and it goes against our common sense.

So,..... then,..... we can stick to the old plan that we possess,... and chase after fleeting moments of happiness or dopamine highs..... or we can let go and reach for joy..... ????

The topic is JOY,..... but it is really about our salvation... because it comes down to who is god in our lives?

Finally, every good Mennonite sermon includes a message about what we must do for others. In this case, it would be about “how we become weight lifters for others.”

We have a strong work ethic, and we put a strong emphasis on duty, so we appreciate knowing what we need to do, or.... in our jargon... How we are to serve others.

Well,..... sorry to disappoint.....

Because nobody has work at being a weight lifter.

When it comes to JOY there is not “duty” involved; there’s not check list or voluntary “joy” service to sign up for.

This one is for YOU. Joy is for you and me!

God offers, among other things, God offers JOY to you and me.

It’s a gift from God to us, with no strings attached, all we have to do is to allow God to lift the weight that is holding us down – to believe enough to let go.

Joy is a gift!

Just as ... the Prince of Peace/ the Messiah / Christ is a gift.

Joy is a gift.

[ ]

Oh,..... if your still thinking it all sounds to selfish to accept this gift of joy from God,..... and that you must do something?

Don’t worry,..... Joy is very contagious.

Don’t worry..... Joy is for me and you, and for the world, too.