Series: The Gifts of Christmas

Message: The Gift of Joy

Text: 1 Peter 1:8

Theme: Advent, Joy

Date: December 16, 2018

Location: Christ Community EFC

Today as we get started talking about the next gift of Christmas in our Advent series, I want us to sing together that wonderful Christmas hymn “Hakuna Matata.”

What? You don’t know that one? You know, “Hakuna matata, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.”

Okay, before you decide that I’ve already had too much of Aunt Edna’s fruit cake, I know it’s “Joy to the World” not “Hakuna Matata.”

But that Swahili phrase made famous in the 1994 movie *The Lion King* sometimes seems to be the way we approach joy, especially this time of year.

The phrase means “no worries.” And in the movie the song is sung by a meerkat name Timba and a warthog named Pumbaa, who are trying to convince the young lion, Simba, to forget about his troubles and just live for the moment.

It’s their “problem-free philosophy,” and it’s an appealing one.

But “no worries” is not what the angels proclaimed that first Christmas.

Instead, they proclaimed good news of great joy for all people.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

As we approach Christmas, we often hear about joy and what a joyful season it is, so we try to cram all the other feelings of life down inside.

If we don’t feel joyful, we try hard to create joy by tossing our troubles aside, ignoring our deepest struggles, and just living for the moment.

But that’s not what the joy of Christmas is all about. And while it may be nice for a moment, it is shallow and short lived.

The gift of joy offered to us in Jesus this Advent season is one of deep and abiding joy.

It is a joy so powerful it can hold its own in a dark and hurting world—and in the midst of all our troubles and struggles.

We will talk a little bit later about how we experience joy through the Advent season, but for now I encourage you to come in a spirit of honesty.

You don’t have to cast aside your worries to unwrap this gift of joy, which Peter called inexpressible and glorious in 1 Peter 1:8 “**Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy**….”

The journey through the season of Advent began by unwrapping the gifts of hope and love.

The word *Advent* means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing.

Advent is not just an extension of Christmas. It is a season that links the past, present, and future.

Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming.

During Advent we light candles on a wreath, which represent aspects of Jesus’s coming to a world lost in darkness.

As we celebrate with our own Advent wreath this season, we light an additional candle each week. Each flame brings us closer to the arrival of the true Light of the world, born in Bethlehem.

The first candle in Advent wreath represents hope. The hope past, present, and future found in the prophecies about Jesus’s coming, remind us to place our hope in Him amid the trials of life.

Hope in the prophecies still to be fulfilled when He comes again.

Last week we lit the candle of love and talked about how we accept, experience, and share the gift of God’s love as we discover how wide and long and high and deep His love is for us.

Today we light the candle of joy. Advent is a season to experience the joy of the coming of the Savior of the world. Joy is more than just a feeling; it is a joy that causes all of creation to celebrate.

It’s deep and powerful, the kind of reJOYcing—talked about in the Psalms, such as Psalm 96:11–13:“**Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes**.”

In Advent, we are preparing and expecting. Jesus is coming! Let us rejoice! This is the gift we unwrap today.

But the question that nags at many of us so often is: What if you just don’t feel joy this season?

How can you receive this gift of joy even in the midst of suffering, loneliness, pain, grief, busyness, stress, or boredom?

Let’s look together at how we can anticipate, recognize, and choose joy.

**1. Anticipate Joy**

Have you ever been waiting for something for so long that you gave up hope it would ever arrive? Or even just forgotten that it’s on the way? Or maybe even not known it was coming?

About the time those letter bombs were being mailed to different political, this strange package showed up at the church. It was addressed to me. But the return address was hand written in Chinses.

It had a bunch of international stamps on it and it was wrapped in clear packing tape.

I was out of the office when it arrived, and with all the stuff in the news Janna called to confirm that I had ordered something or should she reject it and have it returned to sender.

When I got to the church later and opened the package I knew exactly what it was. Two months earlier Dana mentioned that she needed something to help her break down all these boxes at work.

She wanted a knife of something that she could put in the pocket of her apron so it would always be handy.

So, I got online and found this curated plastic knife that was designed just for cutting cardboard. It seemed safe, lightweight, and would fit in her pocket. So I ordered it for her, thinking I would surprise her with.

This thing literally came on a slow boot from China. I had forgotten that I has even ordered it.

You’ve probably heard stories of packages or letters being delivered years after they were sent. There are some great stories.

A woman in her eighties in France received a letter in the mail that had been sent to her great-grandfather . . . in 1877 . . . 138 years earlier!

It was about an order of yarn for her great-grandfather’s spinning mill.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But an even more moving story was written about in the *Washington Post* in 2015. A letter reached its intended recipient fourteen years later.

The letter was written from a father in India to his son, who lived in New York City. It was handwritten a few short weeks after 9/11 but was a bit confusing when it showed up in 2014.

The man’s father had died years earlier. As he described in the newspaper essay, the man was flooded with a deep reminder and sense of connection to his late father.

Tears flooded his eyes as he held a physical object created by his father, expressing concerns about his son’s and grandchildren’s safety and about the events of the world in that tragic time.

In the article, the son wrote, “Fourteen years is a long time to wait for a letter, but rarely has one been more welcome. The expression of concern in the letter is sadly still relevant today. But the physical letter itself was a real joy.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Certainly an unexpected joy. One that was on its way the whole time.

The letter would have been meaningful had it arrived on time, but it took on even deeper emotions over time.

Joy can be that way, whether we know it’s coming or not, whether we’ve given hope for its arrival or not.

Advent begins by talking about hope, the history of the people of Israel who were waiting for a Messiah for thousands of years.

That’s a tough wait! Certainly some of those Israelites gave up hope that a Messiah would ever come. Some probably just carried on, distracted with life, not thinking they would ever see the coming of the Messiah.

But others held out hope. Their waiting was active. And when we engage in an active waiting, anticipating what is to come and watching for it, the waiting has purpose. Hope stays alive.

Joy is similar. Even when we don’t feel joy right now, we can anticipate the coming of joy to the world in the gift of Jesus.

We can prepare to move from our state of discouragement or despair into an experience of life-giving joy.

The shepherds in the Christmas story are a good example. When the angels showed up and delivered a message to the shepherds on a hillside outside Bethlehem, the shepherds didn’t immediately feel joy—they felt scared!

Luke told us in Luke 2:10-11: “**…the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord**.

The angel first addressed their fear, then helped them move beyond it to receive the message of joy that the Savior, the Messiah, the one Israel had anticipated and waited for so long, had been born.

By the end of the night, those shepherds got it. Luke said in 2:20 that “…**the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them**.”

As we walk through Advent, we know what’s coming. We know that Christ, the Messiah, has come. This we can celebrate and rejoice over.

We know there is more to come with His eventual return. This we still must anticipate.

But let’s experience Advent as a season when we anticipate the arrival of joy, even when we struggle with the realities of today.

**2. Recognize Joy**

Do you ever wonder why, out of all the people in the world, the wise men were the only ones who recognized and followed the star of Bethlehem?

It was a star—it was there in the sky for the whole world to see.

But most people, Jews and Gentiles alike, didn’t recognize its meaning.

For these men who did, it caused great joy. Matthew 2:10–11 says, “**When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.**”

The Magi traveled a long way to find the one whose birth was announced by the star. They, no doubt, encountered hardships along the way.

They had to deal with the deceptive tyrant King Herod. They even lost sight of the star for some time.

But they knew what they were looking for, and they kept seeking even when things went wrong.

They recognized the arrival of joy in the world, and they were filled with joy as they responded to it, bringing their gifts in worship to Jesus.

It can be hard to recognize joy in our lives sometimes, especially because it doesn’t always look the way we expect it to.

We expect joy to be free of worry and hardship, but the Bible tells us that joy is found in the midst of, and even because of, hard things.

James 1:2–3 says, “**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance**.”

There most definitely is nothing “hakuna matata” about that brand of joy.

But how much richer and deeper is the experience of joy when it glows bright, illuminating our path in the midst of darkness.

When we recognize that joy comes from trials—because they produce perseverance that makes us into the people God wants us to be—then we can experience joy even in the midst of hard times.

**3. Choose Joy**

The idea that we can choose joy is a little deceiving. We can’t just close our eyes and focus really hard and somehow conjure up joy.

In fact, that often leads us away from joy.

Joy is a gift. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. So we can’t just create it by trying harder—but we can choose to live in the ways that God says bring joy.

The concept is similar to physical health. We can’t get stronger by thinking about and mentally choosing to be stronger.

We have to exercise and build the muscles that make us stronger.

While we can’t just concentrate hard and choose joy, we can choose to give thanks. We can choose to obey. And we can choose to abide.

When we do these things, we open ourselves to the gift of joy.

Let’s look a little closer at those practices.

*Choose Gratitude:* Try it. When you don’t feel joyful, give thanks.

Try it out loud, naming three reasons you have to be thankful—or five or ten. Or write them all down.

You’ll be surprised how long your list actually gets pretty quickly.

It’s counterintuitive—when we don’t feel joyful, we would rather gripe and complain, but giving thanks opens our hearts to joy.

That’s why Paul instructed the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, “**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus**”.

Gratitude goes a long way, and it leads us toward joy. When you don’t know what to do, when you feel overwhelmed by the season, when you feel anything but joy, give thanks.

*Choose to Obey:* In John 15:11 Jesus said, “**These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full**.

So what did He tell His disciples? What was that secret to joy?

Obedience.

Well if you back up one verse to John 15:10, Jesus tells His disciples: “**If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love**.”

We often want joy to just appear from out of nowhere, but Jesus said joy comes from obedience.

Like gratitude, obedience is a practice. It’s a process of seeking to follow God’s ways and to put them into action.

We don’t always get them right. But the more we align ourselves with God’s Word to understand His ways and then choose actions that align with His Word and His wisdom, the more we open ourselves to experience the good fruit of those choices—and the more we prepare ourselves to encounter and receive His joy.

*And finally we must:*

*Choose to Abide:* John 15 also tells us the second part to the secret of joy—and it’s a love triangle!

Jesus said that just as He remains in His Father’s love, we remain in His love, and our joy is complete.

This is not an immediate, quick-satisfaction concept. It’s the idea of continual love and relationship with Jesus that brings the gift of joy into our lives.

Jesus used the metaphor of a vine in the John 15 passage because He was describing a process of ongoing growth and nourishment that produces good fruit.

The same is true in our relationship with Him, and our joy is made complete by imitating Christ’s love and obedience.

Let this season of Advent be a time of gratitude, obedience, and abiding in His love as we anticipate the joy He brings this Christmas.

**Prayer:** *God, thank You that in this season of Advent we can receive and unwrap the gift of joy. Help us to anticipate, recognize, and choose joy as we give thanks, obey, and abide in You. Lead us into joy as You lead us into deeper relationship with You. Give us the courage and strength to rejoice no matter what circumstances we face. And make our joy complete in You.*

**Benediction:** “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4)

1. D. J. MacLennan, “15 Pieces of Mail Delivered Decades After They Were Sent,” Mental\_Floss, May 16, 2016, http://mentalfloss.com/article/79770/15-pieces-mail-delivered-decades-after-they-were-sent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shailendra Ghorpade, “My Father’s Letter Arrived 14 Years Late. His Message Is Right On Time,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-ghost-from-the-past/2015/09/10/6b829158-55a0-11e5-8bb1-b488d231bba2\_story.html?utm\_term=.42925dbe6c3c. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)