

Jeremiah 31:31-34

God Within Us

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Today we start a new worship theme. Our theme for April is Joy. Joy is that emotion that fills your soul, and you cannot help but feel contented. Joy is deeper than happiness; joy comes from within. You cannot fake joy. It is not the same as the smile you plaster on your face when you are trying to please someone.

Joy brings us energy. When we heard the music of the combined youth and chancel choirs, we could not help but smile. Their upbeat way of praising God refreshed our spirits. The psalms tell of people coming to worship with joy: "Come into God's presence with singing, and enter God's courts with praise. Know that the Lord is Good." (Psalm 100) It is God who made us and that fact alone brings a smile to our faces each day.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, a day of great gladness in Jerusalem. When Jesus came into the city, the people were so thrilled to see him that they could not contain their joy. He came from Galilee, a great prophet who had a reputation for healing. Now in Jerusalem, he brought hope to the people there. They were so full of joy at just seeing him that they ripped the palms from the branches and threw their garments on the road. They gave themselves over to exuberant shouts of faith, "Hosanna, Hosanna- Blessed is the One who comes from God."

What can we learn about the Joy of our faith, and how it affects our lives, today?

In the first place, God gave us all a great capacity for Joy. When it comes to joy, people get confused about what the church really believes. We talk about the life of faith being joyful, but many of us experienced church growing up as a mix- of joy and discipline, or happiness and hard work. Whether

it is our memories of long boring sermons, or interminable prayers, or simply struggling to be quiet for an hour, some of us carry the impression that church is hard work. It is good for us- in the same way that castor oil was good for our grandparents. It produces good results however hard it might be to swallow.

Here at the Congregational Church of Needham we strive to look at the traditions of our faith and make them more contemporary. That means we strive to experience joy. For example, today you found a yellow slip in your bulletin. It implied that I was giving away prizes, but that was a joke by the ushers because it is April Fools, today. They wanted to have fun with all of us. We switched to Bible Village because we believe that children should enjoy Sunday School. When they enjoy it, families all have an easier time coming to church.

Some churches make you think that religion is a serious business, but in fact, the Bible speaks over and over about human joy. Holy scripture is full of stories, advice, songs and poems about joyful things in life. Joy is such a prevalent and important emotion in the Old Testament that 15 different verbs and noun forms describe different kinds of joy in the Old Testament. Dozens of times the Hebrew Bible implores the people to be joyful. Over and over the Bible says – rejoice, be glad, sing out, dance for joy, lift up your voices, kick up your heels, shout for joy, blow the trumpet, bang the tamborine.

When we examine the New Testament, we discover that the same theme of joyful living is everywhere. In Greek, there are 7 word forms that mean joy. Jesus was a vibrant man who loved life. He came into villages to bring people happiness they had not known. He healed people who were despairing and took away their sadness. He loved children and enjoyed the questions of women. He cared not for rules, but ate when he was hungry. Jesus loved to host meals and eat at people's homes so much, that he became known for entertaining and relishing a good meal.

In Paul's letters to the early churches he tells them to be happy 74 times. Over and over, he admonishes the new believers, be glad; I found joy, you will too. Exalt, be glad, leap for joy, be of good cheer. 74 times in the letters of Paul he tells the early Christians to be happy, or live with joy.

Today our passage came from the prophet Jeremiah. Most of us don't know too much about Jeremiah. We will talk about him in a minute but most of us don't think about the prophet when we hear the word Jeremiah. In fact when we hear the word Jeremiah, most of us don't even think much about church. No we think about a song made popular by Three Dog Night. Do you know what song I mean?

Jeremiah was a bullfrog, he was good friend of mine.
I never understood a single word he said but I helped him drink
his whine. He always had some mighty fine wine. Sing it Joy to the
world...all the boys and girls now , joy to the fishies in the deep blue
sea and joy to you and me.

Released in 1970, it was purely for fun. Three Dog Night was looking for a different kind of sound which would be fun; of all their music none was more popular than this one which makes you smile. People all over the world – loved it because it was joyful. **God gave us a great capacity for Joy.**

In the second place, it is joy that can carry us through the hard times in life.

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet 600 years before Jesus lived. In those days the Babylonian empire was ascending into power in the region. Fear spread throughout Israel and the people were afraid of Babylon. Jeremiah made things even worse. He told the people of Israel that Babylon was sent to punish Israel for being unfaithful to God. Jeremiah believed that because the Israelites had forgotten their God, and served foreign gods; therefore Babylon would bring them into exile so they would

themselves become foreigners. Jeremiah was only following his conscience, but everybody hated Jeremiah. He was attacked by his own brothers. He was beaten by the crowds. State officials put Jeremiah into the stocks. Finally he was imprisoned by the king, and eventually thrown into a cistern.

In the material I looked up on the prophet Jeremiah, it started by saying that Jeremiah had a joyful childhood. I am not sure exactly why scholars thought to emphasize the joy of his boyhood, except that it emphasizes the contrast between his happy childhood and his hard adulthood. But I think Jeremiah's joyful boyhood was part of what made it possible for him to achieve his mission and live a great life. Often you have to be a happy person at your core, to really realize your potential. Why? Because life is so full of knocks and hard breaks, that joy is the only thing that gets you through it all.

Sometimes the only way to face life's hardest challenges is live with happiness whatever happens to you. When things are tough, people tell you to "go to your happy place." Keep a pocket in your heart where you hold your joy, and go there when you need to.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he knew the city was dangerous for him. He knew he was riding into a trap, in many ways. He knew things would get worse. He knew this might be the end of his ministry and his life. Yet, he chose to enter in a very dramatic way- and one which is heavy with symbols. Most of those symbols are lost on us.

Even today Jerusalem has lots of gates to the city. In those days- the Jews would gather in the holy city, from all over the region to celebrate the Passover. It was an edgy holiday, because the Jews chafed under Roman rule all year long but never more than at Passover. As they read the story of being freed from Egypt they prayed for God to release them from Rome, and the air was full of the hum of insurrection like a chorus of prayers that buzzed everywhere.

Reluctantly, Pontius Pilot left his comfortable villa overlooking the Mediterranean and travelled to Jerusalem. He entered the city through the East Gate at the head of a grand military procession. Columns of soldiers emphasized Rome's determination to keep order throughout Passover. State officials gathered and Jewish rulers bowed to ingratiate themselves, and keep the peace. In this ominous display of military might, he came to town.

On the other side of the city – at the West Gate Jesus staged a very different procession. Only peasants attended this one. Jesus broke the Roman law by riding into town. But he chose a colt to mock the Roman governor. He came humbly to remind people of Zechariah's prediction that the messiah would come on a colt. All the tension of these occupied people- gave over to exuberance this day. They went wild, ripping the very palms from the branches of the trees.

Jesus rode on – carrying all the burden of the symbols he had unleashed, knowing he would pay a price for giving his people hope. He knew that it would cost him to unleash the joy that comes from God. He did not care.

Jesus was bold enough to make fun of Pilot because he never lost his joy. No one could take it from him. He was a man with a great capacity for joy.

What does he do the night before they hauled him away to be tried? He holds a banquet. He could have done so many other things that night. He might have talked to his biographer to make sure they got his story right for history. He might have huddled with his disciples and advisors to plan an escape. He might have sneaked off with lawyers to work on his defense for the next day. He did not care about any of these things. No, instead he held a banquet. On his last night on this earth, he did what he loved most. He broke bread, and shared wine. He talked and reclined in Roman style over a long meal.

God has put joy into all our hearts. Just as Jesus needed to find joy in order to be whole, you cannot realize your potential unless you remember where you keep your joy. Our joy is one important sign that we belong to God. We connect to God whenever we find joy.

When something makes our hearts sing, that's God singing in your heart. When you stare into the eyes of someone you love, and your heart leaps for joy, that is God, in you. When you look at a new day and feel happy, that is a holy impulse. When you sit down tired but satisfied after a good workout at the gym, or a job well done, that is God's joy that floods over you. When you laugh until you cry and lose yourself in mirth, that is God laughing with you.

God is always in us, but when we find joy, then we remember that we are God's own and God is in us. Jeremiah said- "I have written my covenant on your hearts." God's imprint on our hearts is our capacity for joy.