

A SERMON PREACHED ON DECEMBER 16, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The story is told about two wives who were doing their laundry in a laundry mat on the week before Christmas. They were both mending their husband's pants.

One wife said, "My husband is so miserable. Nothing goes right at work, and he can't find anything good on television. Our home is a place of despair. When we go to church, the song leader is terrible and the pastor is an idiot."

The other wife said "My husband is so excited. He gets such joy going to church. He loves the sermons. We laugh all the time and enjoy our family."

It got very quiet in the laundry room as the women continued sewing the pants. One was patching the seat of the pants, and the other was patching the knees.

Ah, it'll make sense if you think deeply about it. In just a little more than a week away we'll be at Christmas. Our theme for today is "joy," which is challenging, since we carried the four-week symbols of hope, peace, joy, and love into our hearts last year! One has to ponder, if I said my best last year, what can I add? But, you might say, there is plenty of joy to go around, if we open ourselves to it. We begin with the *Gospel of Luke*, that in three verses uses all sorts of joyous verbs when speaking about Mary and Jesus before the throng of angels, phrases such as "spread the word," "were amazed," "Mary treasured up all these things," "pondered them in her heart;" "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen....All acts of joy, all joyous works. Joy. Where do we find it? In the skies, perhaps. In the heart, surely. In the act of giving gifts to other, I'd think.

I'm a dog owner. Our nearly 10-year old Labrador retriever brings us much joy on a daily basis. Imagine having to leave your pet behind, like so many of the folks in California had to do because of the wildfires. I'm not sure I could have done it. I read on the Internet the other day a dog that had been discovered waiting three weeks in this owners' car, hoping they would return for him (they did, and all are no better for the worse). The article about the dog and its family was short, but I did come upon another, similar story. In this story we learn that when the Weaver family woke up to flames outside their Santa Rosa home — a region ravaged by deadly wildfires — there wasn't much time. They had to get out. But sometime during that panicked retreat from the house, the family dog, Izzy, bolted away. Trying to find her amid the chaos of fire proved too dangerous. And so this family, like countless others in California's wine country, left more than just their home behind. When they drove through sheer walls of flame and across an uncertain wooden bridge to get to safety — they left their hearts back at home.

It turned out, it was the one thing they couldn't leave behind. A day and a half later, while the area was still smoldering and roads were still closed, Jack Weaver and Patrick Widen made the

nearly-three-mile trek back to the house. "It was incredibly important," Weaver, who grew up in that house, tells the local news service, MNN. "My mother was a wreck for having gone through that. Nobody wanted us to go back because they were worried we would get injured." In a video of their return, you can hear the men laboring to catch their breath amid blackened trees and still-crackling ruins. "Izzy!" Weaver is heard calling into the smoky veil. Over and over again. They push farther and farther ahead. "Izzy!" "Almost to the house," Weaver says in the video. "I can see ... the gate. The gate's still standing."

A moment later, he adds, "I don't see the house at all." It had burned to the ground. But someone was still standing. "Izzy's here!" Weaver calls, his voice choked with emotion. "Izzy!" "Oh my God! Come here, baby!" The giant dog bounces into view, her tail whirring like a helicopter. "When she came running around — you can probably hear it in my voice — we were shocked and ecstatic," Weaver says later. "I wish I could have filmed longer, the happy reunion, but I was so happy I dropped my phone." Since the family posted the video, it's been shared more than 4,000 times. Maybe it's a testament to the need for all of us to find a happy ending amid heartache. In any case, Izzy is where she belongs now — in the arms of her family — a testament to faith under fire. "She didn't have a burn on her," Weaver says. "It definitely lifted my family's spirits."ii

So maybe this is why so many folks get puppies for Christmas. Of course, we all wish the puppies or grown-up dogs would come from shelters instead of puppy mills, but at least they will not be on the street, looking for a home like we see and hear so often.

While it may seem inappropriate to mix the arrival of cute puppies with the arrival of the savior of the world Christ child (besides, it's already been done, with softening touches, such as stable animals, shepherd and sheep, and singing angels), I do understand the need to draw the reader/the hearer of the story into the tale, and joyous things can help us celebrate. Richard Rodgers was brilliant to be able to come up with so many items that bring us joy. You probably never thought of it as a Christmas carol, but "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music* meets all the criteria (we might remember a few of the lyrics, but who can recall them all?):

Raindrops on roses  
and whiskers on kittens  
Bright copper kettles  
and warm woolen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings  
These are a few of my favorite things  
Cream colored ponies and crisp apple strudels  
Doorbells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles

Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings  
These are a few of my favorite things.  
Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes  
Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes

Silver white winters that melt into springs  
These are a few of my favorite things  
When the dog bites, when the bee stings  
When I'm feeling sad

I simply remember my favorite things  
And then I don't feel so badiii

Joy is found in discovering or rediscovering our favorite things. We repeat them yearly in our other Christmas carols. Imagine if there were a single word that describes what Christmas is all about, Christmas would be incomplete without that little word “joy.” Several of our favorite carols mention it: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come,” “O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,” “Shepherds, why this jubilee, why your joyous strains prolong?” “Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice,” “Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies, with th’ angelic host proclaim, ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem.’”<sup>iv</sup> Yet no matter what we sing, no matter what others say to us during Christmastide, joy can still allude us. Having a less stressful and more joyful holiday season may be as simple as opening the “true gifts” of Christmas found in the Bible, suggests Ron Edmonson, a Tennessee pastor. “There is not a “secret formula” (it seems) to finding great joy. It’s really a matter of listening to Scripture.

“It seems to me that many believers, and nonbelievers, get distracted with the busyness of Christmas and miss its true meaning,” he said. “In the season intended to bring ‘Joy to the World’ we spend more energy seeking gratification from gifts that bring us temporary happiness, but often fail to ‘open’ the true gifts of Christ.”

In his post “5 Suggestions for Finding More Joy at Christmas,” Edmondson states, “Joy is not an option for a believer, as I read the Scriptures. For many, however, finding joy at Christmas is harder than other times of the year. Memories of loved ones, financial struggles, health issues, and relationship woes often make for a very difficult celebration.”

To combat holiday stress and increase joy, Edmonson’s suggestions are:

**“Lower expectations of others** – We shouldn’t hold others to expectations we set for them. People, even the best of people, will disappoint us.

**Increase your investment in others** – Something supernatural happens when we share with others. We are to give and extend grace, as it was given to us.

**Examine your life and your inward thoughts** – You can’t have joy with a holy God if you are living contrary to God’s relationship with you.

**Change your perspective** – Choosing to be greatly joyful is not based on circumstances, but comes by perspective.

**Set your eyes on the prize** – If you’re struggling to find joy in life, open your eyes on and hearts to the love of Christ, who is the author and perfecter of your faith.”

Edmondson said that if there is any word that captures the mood and the spirit of Christmas best, it’s the word “joy.”

“It’s a word that means despite any circumstances in your life you have joy,” he explained. “This is supposed to be a joyous season. Jesus came so that we could experience joy. Not always happiness, but joy, this inner contentment, this calm delight.”

“Find the proper perspective and you will find the joy. That perspective is to be [joyful] regardless of your circumstances,” he says.<sup>v</sup>

So, keep all these thoughts in mind when getting ready for Christmas this week and next. And remember, as the writer and theologian said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”<sup>vi</sup> Then my friends, celebrate!

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.  
Pastor

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<sup>i</sup> <http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/two-husbands>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://doggiescare.com/puppy-stranded-wildfire-found-waiting-family-return-burned-home/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.songlyrics.com/julie-andrews/my-favorite-things-lyrics/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1997-12-21-Christmas-Joy/>

<sup>v</sup> Adapted from <https://www.christianpost.com/news/5-tips-for-finding-more-joy-at-christmas.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.wow4u.com/joy/>