

THEME OF WONDER

our theme for advent is wonder. that we would we would have a sense of wonder and awe instilled into our hearts this Christmas season.

There are two types of wonder

the first type we may be most familiar with and it has to do with our thinking, with questioning and inquiring. For example: when I read scripture I wonder what God might be speaking to me, I wonder about my kids and what they will be like as adults, and everyday at about 4:30 I wonder why we have to eat dinner every single night.

The second is a sense of awe and amazement, which is the type of wonder we are getting at in the the theme of advent this year.

As I have prepared this sermon over the past many weeks a lot of my thinking has been consumed with the first type of wonder, a wonder that at times has had an edge of doubt, maybe not quite like Zachariah had when the angel announce that he and his elderly, barren wife would have a son, but more like when Jesus called Peter out of the boat and once he was out there maybe thought "what did i just get myself into". Either way there is doubt. Sometimes I have wondered like Mary did when the same angel told her about this seemingly impossible plan of Gods. She asked, how? with a curiosity grounded in faith and humility.

- I have wondered what to say and if I could preach sermon. Ive wondered about my experiences and how they line up with what i read in this story. Ive wondered about you and what might the Holy Spirit say to you.
- There are so many things to wonder and I can not possibly know the answer to many of my questions...because they require me to trust God, to have faith and without faith it is impossible to please the Lord - Heb 11:6
- I was invited a while back by Micah to join him in preaching this advent series

as it got close and we decided what the theme and topic of each Sunday would and he asked me if I would take this one.

I hadn't noticed in the planning that there was an advent Sunday on dec 22 until Micah suggested this day.

This day is not an ordinary day in December for my family. This day 3 years ago my mum went to be with Jesus. Today is her 3rd birthday in heaven.

- So from the very start of my preparation I had a big question. Why? Why this day God? Because its not a coincidence.

JOY

- As I read through the story I couldn't help but to see how much Joy and rejoicing there was.

I know that between the lines there is surely some suffering. Mary would have been nearly stoned and absolutely shamed for being pregnant out of wedlock

But what I read on these pages is Joy!

Mary, Elizabeth and even baby John are rejoicing. The angel, shepherds and Magi are full of joy. And of course they would be. This is the moment, the messiah is coming!

This brought up some big questions for me that has formed the shape of this message and that is "where does this story full of joy meet me in a season of sorrow?" "What if I'm not happy at Christmas?" "What if my loss feels even heavier at Christmas?"

MY EXPERIENCE OF JOY

-It took me a few days of wrestling with this question before God graciously reminded me, on my Mum's birthday, in early November of a moment that I experienced shortly after she went to heaven.

I have thought about whether or not to even share this only because I know that God does not work the same way with everyone in every situation, and I have worried a little bit that someone might think "well that's great for you, but God hasn't done that for me" Or that after hearing my experience you might put yourself before the Lord, not experience anything and wonder what is wrong, or worse, that you would think that God is not with you.

So to hear my experience and to think these things would be missing the point of what I want to share with you, which is Hope. I want to share with you the hope that there can be joy even in a season of sorrow and suffering.

The time that I'm talking about happened very shortly after my Mum went to heaven. I lay before God with my grief and a broken heart. I was crying out to Him, not even asking anything, just laying my pain before Him and He gave me a sense of his presence, it was comfort, like a hug that enveloped me. In that moment I felt joy, joy that I have had a hard time describing because my circumstances and my feelings were as far away from any happiness or gladness that we usually associate with Joy, that I have ever felt. So Joy is a very peculiar thing and sometimes hard to describe, even though I was broken I felt joy. God had given me the gift of being aware of his presence and it filled me with wonder and hope and peace. Joy encompasses all of these things. It was so real and so awe inspiring that it left such an impression on me.

Joy is the very presence of God!

true Joy can only be found in God.

I can feel joy in a time of grief. A time so far from happy. Joy and happiness are not one and the same.

I wanted to share my experience and my thoughts on Joy because I know that many people struggle even more so this time of year. and I want you to know that Joy is a gift that God wants to give you and that Joy can share the space with your suffering and sorrow.

JOY AS A CHOICE

I heard a sermon the other day that said joy is something we choose and that joy and happiness are basically the same thing.

You can choose Joy, that even when life is hard you can still have joy, you can still be happy.

I'm sure you have heard something like this before, that joy is a choice. A mindset.

This made me have to really think through my thoughts. Because Something about this just didn't sit quite right with me.

To say choose joy sounds too much like we should pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and check the sorrow at the door.

to chose joy requires a mind over matter type of thinking. it requires you to shift your perspective and focus on something beyond your circumstance.

what if you do not have that capacity? what if your situation is so dire that you have no strength to choose joy? if you are in a situation where you feel helpless to will yourself into a joyful mind frame. what then?

Joy is a gift.

Joy is one of the fruits of the spirit and does a tree choose to bear fruit?

In John 17 Jesus prayed for his disciples out loud so that they would know The full measure of his Joy. He wanted them to be one as he was one with the father.

Jesus' joy came from being one with the father.

and in John 15 he says "I am the vine and you are the branches, if a man remains in me and I in him, he will bare much fruit".

So there is a choice here, it is not that we can choose joy necessarily, but that we choose to remain in the father and joy is found in him.

If you can choose joy in a difficult situation it is because the Holy Spirit is working in you. It is a gift, an understanding that joy comes from Jesus.

So the choice is not choosing Joy, but maybe choosing how we posture ourselves towards God in any given situation.

JOY AND HAPPINESS

and what about Joy and happiness?

are they basically the same or are they different?

People have a hard time describing Joy it seems. Its described as a kind of happiness only deeper.

people use the word joy for when they mean a deeper kind of happiness.

Its peculiar, and the more I look into it the more complex it seems.

There is so much about Joy in the bible that one sermon just barely scratches the surface.

one thing I do notice about Joy in the bible though is that no matter if one is rejoicing or suffering, God is the source of the joy.

so the difference lies in the source.

-Happiness is a satisfaction with what is happening outside of us and around us

we will be happy along as everything is going well. we all know that this can change in a heartbeat.

but because the source of joy is the presence of God, then you don't need for things to be going well in order to have it

Joy is able to share the space with your sadness or suffering because it is the very presence of God with you.

You can still have joy even in the worst of circumstances it is a gift, that comes as a natural result of knowing the Lord. Not a result of our ability to choose it, it is a result of the Holy spirits work in us. helping us to look to the father, to remain in him.

the joy of the lord will be your strength because joy is his presence

joy is gods comfort when you are low, joy is the hope that what is today will not always be. Our God is one who loves the lowly, the humble and the poor. and this includes the poor in spirit.

JOY IS DEEP

as people, we instinctively know that joy is deeper.

deep within us, our souls long to be satisfied. We all have a desire within us that can only be met by God.

"Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls" says the Psalmist in 42:7. He has been brought low by affliction and calls out to God.

The depth of Gods love meets you in the depth of your need for him.

Here in Isaiah 51:10&11 it says "was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over? The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting Joy will crown their heads. Gladness and Joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away. I, even I, am He who comforts you..."

This verse is telling us to remember who our God is, remember that he made a way in the deep. we have been redeemed and so we have hope of a future Joy with him. Hope that one day there will be no more sorrow and no more suffering, only Joy in His presence forever.

Through Jesus, God dried up that sea, He made a road in the depths of it so that we, the redeemed might cross over.

In Hebrews 12:2 we read that Jesus endured the cross because of the Joy that was set before Him.

That we would have what he had known before he became human, everlasting Joy in the presence of God.

Christmas is about God coming to earth to meet our deepest need, our need of a saviour.

This is why there is so much Joy in this story. Jesus has come.

There is hope in the promise of our future joy with God, which brings peace to our souls, it wells up inside of us and comes out as praise.

CS Lewis said "Praise is the mode of Love that always has some element of Joy in it." and "Don't we in praise somehow enjoy what we praise?"

Sharing this Hope, Joy and Peace that we have in the Lord is to show Love, to Him and to one another. And this is advent, the waiting, the longing, the Joy of Gods gift to us and the sharing of this gift with others.

Psalms 16:11 says "you will fill me with Joy in your presence".

in knowing just a little bit more of what joy is, we can look at the story of Christmas in a new light.

The Joy has turned to praise, to God as the giver and his blessings as the gift.

MARY

Luke wrote his book to be as accurate as possible. he went straight to the source when he could to get a detailed account.

So what we read about Mary is what she herself told Luke.

Mary's encounter with Gabriel tells us a little of who she was and I want to focus on her responses,

The story here did not start as one that was full of Joy. It first started out with Mary being afraid and confused.

In fact alongside most of the stories we read here there is fear and confusion before Joy.

Zachariah-
Joseph-
Mary-
shepherds-

sometimes we feel fear and confusion before joy.

MARY IS TROUBLED

After the angel greets her we are told that she is greatly troubled.

This phrase “greatly troubled” is like saying she was in acute distress but its probably more emphatic than that.

Mary was just going about her business and an angel appears to her, she was caught off guard.

Every time an angel shows up, people are afraid. It is always one of the first things they say to people. “Dont be afraid”

Have you ever been going about your business and then one of your kids or a friend jumps out at you from around a corner or a bush or something and scares the living day lights out of you?

Im normally a pretty quiet person and I don’t usually get to excited about things but every time this happens to me I just automatically scream. I can’t even help it. It is an automatic response.

as a child and a teenager I did not appreciate being scared at all and so another automatic response I had was to make sure whoever scared me know that I found it more annoying than funny.

Iv had to work on this response because kids like to scare...I want to be able to laugh with my kids...not scold them for having a little fun with me.

It has taken some reconditioning to change my response because it is very difficult to think from your right mind in this situation.

So I Imagine Mary and Gabriels encounter starting off a little like this, but she had the added fear of it being an angel who was the one in front of her.

He had just appeared to her, who knows what she was doing but whatever it was Im sure she was not expecting an angel to be joining her.

Heart and thoughts racing

confused at the greeting

He called her favoured? Would she have ever been called that before?

as far as her status goes she was a young unmarried girl who was likely poor. She would have been used to serving others, to favouring others, not to being favoured.

Gabriel goes on to deliver the and Mary asks a question, “how will this be?”

It is natural for her to ask this question, after all humanly speaking this is impossible.

Gods plans do not always make sense to us and sometimes we wonder. we ask questions.

Asking questions is important.

God invites us to join Him, not to be robots that do his bidding.

Asking questions is part of how we engage in our relationship with God.

so why is it then that just a few verses earlier Zachariah had asked a question of Gabriel after hearing his message, he said "How can I be sure of this?". He was rebuked after he asked this question.

So why is Mary not rebuked for asking a question?

its because Marys question comes out of her faith in God and Zachariahs out of doubt.

one a question of honest wonder and the other a question of sceptic doubt.

Zachariah was basically saying "Im going to need some proof. do you even know my situation?". like having an angel deliver a message of hope from God wasn't proof enough.

Mary was curious and her question was grounded in humility and faith.

Marys response is pretty incredible when you take the whole situation into account.

In the face of fear and being caught off guard our reactions are more automatic. we default to however we have been conditioning our minds to respond.

Marys response is one of trust. She is open to whatever His plan is for her life.

Marys default was humility and her response reflects the posture of her heart towards God.

in verse 26 we read her how she sees herself "I am the Lords servant"

It isn't that she worked really hard at becoming humble but that she cooperated with Gods grace.

The way she responded reflected the way she had been responding to Gods grace all along.

I wonder how we cooperate with the grace God has given us?

How might we posture our hearts towards God?

If we grieve do we grieve before Him? Do we weep in his presence? Do we rejoice and give thanks when things are good, Praising in due order; of Him as the giver and his blessings as the gift? as CS Lewis would have said it.

MARY'S POSTURE

The word that kept coming to my mind during all my preparation was posture.

In the ways that Mary responds through out this story it shows us that the posture of her heart was soft towards God.

She was willing to give up her own plan for her life in favour of Gods.

In the story of the shepherds there is a little verse about Mary. "but mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart"

Theres another time in this same chapter where a very similar statement is made. Its in verse 51.

It happened when Jesus was 12. His parents couldn't find him for 3 days and when they finally did find him in the temple he questions their anxiety, didn't they know he was in his fathers house?

That certainly made her think, but treasuring and pondering were a part of Marys life.

Pondering is something that takes time and space. We can not hurry up and ponder, and how can we treasure without first pondering?

I think we all know what it is to ponder and treasure special moments. Its like we have a space in our minds and hearts that is a treasure box.

We fill it with memories and thoughts that we would like to revisit and when we have time and space we will pull them out examine them. We carefully weigh these thoughts and memories, we ponder them and so, treasure them.

Mary was right at the beginning of motherhood and smack in the middle of it when we read that she pondered. These are busy times.

What could it look like for us to ponder when life is busy? could be as simple as a verse on a post it note by the kitchen sink that we take a second to read as we wash the dishes.

Pondering can be a gateway to communion with God. To ponder who God is, is to love him.

MARYS GIFTS

BLESSING

God gave Mary a sign of his grace towards her and it was through her relative Elizabeth. who was now in her 6th month of pregnancy.

Mary was able to confirm this message she received.

Elizabeths words to her were That she was "Blessed among women".

She is blessed not only because she will be the mother of the messiah but also because she believed what the angel told her.

God blesses faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. We honour God when we have faith in Him.

God invited Mary to join Him in His plan and it came with a natural blessing. The blessing of honour.

She said yes to God having full faith that He would work out his plan for her and for all his people.

In Marys song she praises God for the blessings he has bestowed on her but not just on her, His blessing and mercy is extended to all his children.

God is keeping His promise to send the Messiah. She recognized the magnitude of this blessing. Not only was she personally blessed but God was blessing all his children through this gift.

The time of waiting was coming to an end. The dawn of redemption was breaking. Joy was on the horizon.

When God gives a blessing he does not only bless one person, his blessings are far reaching and his plan is so much bigger than we can comprehend.

When he blesses you keep your eyes open for how your blessing has become someone else blessing as well. Gods plan is far too big to bless just one person.

Bob and I lived in verson for 12 years and about 4 years ago sensed Gods call for us to move. we were obedient to that call and so Bob resigned his position as youth pastor at our church and we sold our house, all the while we were anticipating that at any moment God would provide an obvious next step. He didn't work like we thought though so we 'made our own plans" and moved in with my parents until we could figure things out. I realized part way through our stay there that their open door for us was not just a blessing to us, it was a blessing for them too. to be building into our kids lives and spending some really quality time with them. it was about a year after this time that my mum passed away and in hindsight I realized just how big of a blessing that time with her was. not only for me but for my kids, my husband and my dad.

The blessings that God gives you will not only be for you.

And sometimes you will not realize the scope of that blessing until later.

His blessings don't always look the way we would expect them to look, sometimes they come in the middle of confusion and hardship only to be fully realized at a later time.

I recently read a post on facebook. It was about a mother who was peeling a banana for her small son and the banana fell out of the peel. He had a melt down and would not eat the banana because that's not how he wanted it to be. She tried to convince him that it was still the same thing he had been asking for but it just looked different. It dawned on her that sometimes we do this to God. We ask for his blessing and if it comes in a way that we don't like or weren't expecting then we say "No no God, not like that" just like her son did.

How might God be blessing you now? How might he be working with you and for you even in difficulty?

FAVOUR

Mary was given the gift of Gods favour.

In the angels greeting he called her highly favoured.

I took a closer look at the word favoured that the angel first used in his greeting with Mary.

Some use this word to make a case for why Mary should be worshiped.

She was favoured by God after all, full of grace as some translations say, so shouldn't we also favour her?

But what I learned about this word "favoured" is really great.

It is a word used only one other time in the bible and in the greek it relates to grace but not in the way we might think.

This word is defined as "to show kindness to someone, with the implication of graciousness on the part of the one showing such kindness".

The word for favoured here tells us more about who God is than of who Mary is. Look at how gracious God is! He is showing a kindness towards Mary. This is His Grace!

It means that we are to read this story and come away with an awe that God is the lifter of the lowly and a bestower of grace.

Mary is aware of this grace, this kindness that has been extended to her. She has been elevated from her low status to that of the mother of our Lord as Elizabeth puts it.

The gifts that God gives to Mary are also the gifts that He extends to us. I said that the word favoured was used one other time. it is found in Eph 1:6 which says "to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

"Freely given." This is the same geek word used for favoured in the angels greeting to mary.

this word changes entirely how we are to see Mary.

She is a picture of how God Lavishes His grace on us all. We are being pointed to the giver of the gift!

God has given Mary the gift of his grace and he has given you this same gift.

God decided to freely bestow his grace on Mary and he also decided to freely give you that same grace through Jesus.

God has given us the honour of being His children. Marys blessing can be ours also if we believe that what The Lord says is true.

You do not need to be 'good enough' to receive this blessing, none of us could ever be good enough.

Thats why Jesus came, He is enough. We need only to receive it, to enter into his blessing of everlasting joy in his presence.

Now might not be easy. right now you might be suffering.

But there is hope. Psalm 30:5 “Weeping may stay for the night but Joy comes in the morning.”

I've looked over this story and dug deep into it and found it to be so full of treasures that it has been hard to know what to share, there is so much and some of it is not meant for this moment but for me, to wonder in amazement at and to continue pondering.

Two kinds of wonder. wonder that is a question, if allowed to become pondering might turn into the wonder that is awe, which we will treasure. So I encourage you to go digging for treasures in Gods word, to ponder them because you will surely find wonder in it.

Whatever season of life you find yourself in, make space in your thoughts to ponder God. To treasure who he is. Posture your heart to receive the grace that he so freely gives.