

Christmas Sermon: "Simply, Extraordinary Joy"
Pastor Sam Richards
December 20, 2020—Christmas Sunday

This morning I intend to bring together three texts which speak to me about **joy inexpressible**—joy in creation, joy in regeneration and joy in redemption.

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Gen. 1:2

"In the beginning there was nothing in the earth that had life, or any disposition towards it. The Holy Spirit moved upon the prepared matter and communicated unto it the principle of life." -John Owen, reflecting on Gen. 1:2. His comment impressed upon me, the lifelessness which prevailed in the beginning—before God acted. And One continues, "Since Adam brought spiritual darkness and death upon all mankind, no man who has ever lived has had *the least principle of life in him*, or any disposition towards it. In this state of things the Holy Spirit must create life. He undertakes this by the effectual communication of a new principle of spiritual life unto the souls of God's elect."

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. Gen. 2:7

What was inert as dirt awoke, **became a living being**. Without the provocation of the Holy Spirit inert is where things sat! Being born again of God is also a coming alive. "There was nothing in the earth that had life, or any disposition towards it." That is the significance of **without form and void . . .** and that is the implication of the **darkness over the face of the deep**. That darkness native to the **man of dust from the ground**; he knew nothing, sensed nothing because he was, as yet, nothing but insensible matter. The joy came with the bequest of life, **breathed into his nostrils**. Man awoke from oblivion to joy! Wonder swept over him, consciousness came as a blizzard—relentless, filling, transforming. Created for companionship with God, for worship, praise and service of God . . . made capable of spiritual worship *from the outset*. What a joy to do! What a joy to be! Joy is the atmosphere, along with wonder, that Adam breathed and in which even God made man. In the beginning there was no need for promises, nor need for the reassurance of covenant! When God made man, man was complete, perfect, pure, fully realized—what a joyful state!

Owen then proceeds, making application of Gen. 1:2, to write about "the effectual communication of a new principle of spiritual life" and asserts the following: "This work is regeneration, and the Spirit is the principal and efficient cause of it." (John 3:8; **The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.**)

The principal and efficient cause. . . of life.

Regeneration is a secondary creative act! A creature just as new, and startling as Adam was when made, is brought into being, in the instant we are regenerated. We

were as the earth, **without form and void** again. We were in **darkness** again due to sin. A spiritual darkness covered the face of our being, the depth of our being—very like the primordial darkness of the beginning. Its superficiality lay like a fog over us. We couldn't see, think, or relate because, spiritually speaking, we were as gathered dust **from the ground**, lacking the vital principle, lacking life. Sin had taken our life. We were dead, inanimate as a stone, or ice. What joy then there is in this vital awakening! Even more than at the first creation of man, perhaps? In regeneration, forgiveness is joined to love and both prove catalyst to joy. It was a happy man who penned these words of salutation, words of praise:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance *which is* imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in *the* last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various [a]trials, 7 so that the [b]proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which perishes though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and [c]full of glory, 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith, the salvation of [d]your souls.

Footnotes

- a. [1 Peter 1:6](#) Or *temptations*
- b. [1 Peter 1:7](#) Or *genuineness*
- c. [1 Peter 1:8](#) Lit *glorified*
- d. [1 Peter 1:9](#) One early ms does not contain *your*

This deep, undergirding joy—**joy inexpressible!**—is the spirit of Christmas! Joy sustains us, maintains us, strengthens us *and it is to be the distinguishing mark of our identity*. **Full of glory**. Praise should emit from us, living waters as a rushing stream. Because we have cause. We have been **born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**. (v.3) We are resurrection people, people who have been energized by the same mighty power which raised a dead Jesus to our glorified and living God—a *done deal*, a present possession. If we have forgotten our condition, may it be raised to remembrance. Christmas is about the joy of resurrected life, it is about our great joy—both here and both now.

And then the wind blew in Bethlehem. Mary was delivered of the **holy thing** conceived in her by the **power the Almighty**, which had **overshadowed her** and she named him Jesus. **But the angel said to them** (the shepherds), **'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.** (Luke 2:10-11) One moment there was a star-studded night, open fields chilled in shadows and sheep and country shepherds **staying in the fields, keeping watch over**

their sheep by night—just doing their job. The sheep were apparently un-folded—not penned, so their *tenders* kept watch, guarded them—they were the sheep only protection from predators and thieves. **And suddenly, an angel of the Lord stood before them.** The wind had shifted. **And the glory of the Lord shone around them.** (v. 9) **They were terribly afraid.** You would be, too.

All is normal, and so ordinary . . . then the wind shifts, and the ***shekinah glory of God appears!*** **Suddenly.** “The glory of the divine presence?” The brilliant, incomparable light of divine glory?! **The angel of the Lord?** Whoever had heard such things, seen such things . . . the glory of God outside the temple? In the fields . . . a vast dome of brightness? Not all the Christmas lights in Christendom, all lit up at the same time, could approximate the glory of this shekinah display! How ironic, shepherds tending their sheep, when the Great Shepherd appears *tending to them!* They didn’t even know their need. Just so, the unregenerate know nothing of God, being un-quickened **dust from the ground!** And then the wind blew!

This will be a sign for you . . . you will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger. (v. 12) We have rehearsed Christmas before, and so do not find this extraordinary. Too bad. In order for it to qualify as **a sign** a baby in a manger must be unusual—and the manger doubling as a bassinet! What humble circumstances would issue in such a distinctive arrangement: **a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger.** The shekinah glory was for their awakening. It is not written that the cave, or stable was supernaturally lit—though we work to stage it so. No halo’s. We make it quite the nativity production!

And suddenly there appeared (nothing by half measures tonight!) **with the angel—a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying.** Nothing about singing, it was more of a choral reading! **Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.** (v. 14) It was God’s good pleasure to cause the wind to blow, the angel to appear, the shepherds to behold it all in the open fields that Christmas night! Wonderful, marvelous . . . **good news of great joy!** How our sad and sorrow deadened hearts, lying still and lifeless, long for God’s harkening good pleasure! O God how desperately we need your hope to appear, announcing **good news of great joy.** We echo Christmas . . . we read and thrill, hoping for the freshness of first time to be breathed unto us! Come, Holy Spirit and make this advent come alive for us as you did for them.

“There was nothing in the earth that had life, or any disposition towards it.” Why, that’s us . . . that is our condition. Hear the echo? We are just doing our business, being ordinary. Come and intercept us . . . interrupt us. Breach the darkness with your brightness. Shine on us.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven (from whence we gather they had been sent!), the **Shepherds began to say to one another, ‘Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.** (v. 15) They hurried to verify the intervention of God. **They found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.** Baby, check. Wrapped in cloths, check. Lying in a manger, check, check —just as the angel told them. The intervention of God was verified in their experience! Nice.

It doesn't always happen so grandly, as with a nativity—with all the supernatural trappings (angels, proclamations, physical confirmation and evidence).. And it doesn't always include a checked out event—but it often does. Christmas surely does come other ways. For instance, when Judah said, **She is more righteous than I**, to Tamar (Gen. 38:26), following up on her declaration, **I am with child by the man to whom these things belong** (v. 25) it was as Christmas to him. For in that moment, under those circumstances, Judah realized that for all his treachery, the will of God was undeterred—that the woman appointed by God to carry forward the seed of promise—which transmission he inadvertently plotted to circumvent!—was indeed pregnant with Perez who stood in the messianic line!

Talk about a *living hope* for her and for us! God blessed us, his people despite the mess that Judah was *at that point in his life*! And Bethlehem, the city of David, we note was not much of a town—especially before the Savior of mankind was born there! His birth was announced by an angel and he was discovered by **certain, poor shepherds in fields as they lay . . . where they lay keeping their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep**. ("The First Noel," v.1) Those certain, poor shepherds weren't poor anymore—their souls quickened. They went their way enriched. Thirty years later, who is to say where they were. Did they find their way home to the Shepherd's fold? Did they thrill to hear that baby, all grown up, speak words of wisdom, of insight and truth? *Did it all come together for them and did they find great joy?* I fondly hope, and longingly trust that it might have been so. Even as I long for it to be so for you!

Tamar was no stranger to joy! She went from condemned to death, burned alive for harlotry, to glorious motherhood and acceptance—a kind of Christmas gift to her. Yes, her way there was a trail of grief and tears. She was widowed, rejected, abused, cast off by in-laws and socially ostracized—treated despicably by Judah! But God had inter-vened in her life, as he has in our history of redemption, all in prelude to the coming of the king—into our hearts, or into the world. See, God took note of her poor estate and He exalted her. He was *pleased with her*—both by her and in her! Therefore He gave her great joy, vindication and fulfillment—twin boys, family. Sounds very much like Christmas. Tamar was a three month pregnant Canaanite daughter of a pagan priest—but that didn't exclude her from her ordained service. **They will come from every tribe and every nation**. (Rev. 7:9) Christ's family tree was Tamar's Christmas tree.

Both the birth of Jesus and the resurrection of the same were entirely extraordinary—that is, exceptional, unique and unusual events—things that could happen once and never be duplicated again. *These things are really real—and we can only live realistically in the light/ presence of them!* We celebrate that specialness with **great joy**—as *we are in the world we inhabit—we rejoice at what our Lord and Savior has accomplished on our behalf:*

even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various [a]trials, 7 so that the [b]proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which perishes though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

Peter labors under few illusions as to the present difficulties we labor under until the completion of all things, until the great and glorious day of the Lord. But we, as mainly those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit are imbued with a sense of God's

power and presence unlike that experienced by any other people. We have an **assurance**—and a level of **spiritual security**, knowing **whom we have believed** and, further, that **what he has promised he is able to perform**. *As a result, we have joy, love and understanding to an outstanding, and exceptional degree*—we have a fullness of joy, a complete joy and the abundance of life that comes with that. Again I stress this is only something available to believers, those who know themselves to be **the children of God**.

Knowing that we are **the children of God** has its retrospective and its prospective side. The retrospective is what we find in Ephesians 2:1: **And you were dead in your trespasses and sins**. This refers to our spiritual condition, or our *inertness* prior to our adoption as *sons* through the operation of the Holy Spirit as motivated by grace and God's surpassing mercy and great love. We are the recipients of divine favor when we move from **deadness to aliveness in Christ**. Allow us to press home this parallel: deadness is to our retrospect as aliveness is to our prospects! Our former ways of walking (**according to the prince of the power of the air**—namely Satan) undertaken in *the spiritual atmosphere of disobedience* (**the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience**—our former motivation was rebellious). This, or something very like it, is what I mean by our retrospect.

It should inculcate in us *great joy* to acknowledge our prospect, which contrasts so strongly with our retrospect. The same grace and mercy which planted the tree in the garden is expressed (**rich mercy . . . great love**) in our being **made alive together with Christ**. (v. 5). **With Christ** alludes to the resurrection. We are **made alive** by being **raised with Christ** through the self-same power which **raised Jesus from the dead**—that power, and none of a lesser magnitude, is required to escape the gravitational force of sin! The grace thrusters of God's redeeming love must overpower the satanic chains of our bondage to **the lusts of the flesh, desires of the flesh and of the mind**! Our inertness is coupled with inertia, the stationary force of sin. **Even when we were dead in our transgressions** (God) **made us alive**.

What does it take to move us beyond happy? It takes a move of God. May God so move you! I urge you to consider where you are, as compared to where you once were! I urge you to evaluate your moments of joy and consider this: a far, far greater joy lies in what God has undertaken for you . . . may that joy find you this Christmas season.

Amen.