



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Sing for Joy

Psalm 98

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Do you ever hear churchy words and just kind of wonder what they mean? If you've grown up in church the words might be familiar, but I still think we struggle – church people or not – to understand some of the spiritual things described in the Bible.

In our confirmation class we've seen this week after week. Jesus talks to people and has to break it down into images and stories they can understand. And it doesn't really matter if he's talking to religious leaders, his own followers, or outcasts in society. Actually, the outcasts sometimes seem to have a leg up on understanding.

I think the word JOY is one of those things that needs explaining. We have some inclination what it means. And we use it often at this time of year. But what is it exactly? It's not the same as happiness. It's something a little different, often coming in the context of or in contrast with suffering. Let's look at the Psalm and then at two places Jesus compares it to something we might understand.

Salvation and Judgment

Psalm 98 is full of imagery and song, all around the theme of rejoicing in what God has done and will do. To help us understand the size and scope of this rejoicing, we hear imagery of mountains shouting, seas roaring, and rivers clapping their metaphorical hands. And that is helpful – if you like poetry! – because it gives us some inkling of the energy and glory of joy over God's work. Just imagine being at the

ocean and hearing the roar of the waves. Now re-frame that as celebration of God's power... that's some joy!

But what is God's work? What has God done that we would rejoice?

This Psalm breaks it down into two parts of one whole. God has brought salvation (v.3) and is coming to judge the world justly and rightly (v.9). And for those things, says the Psalmist, are worthy of joy.

In verse 3, God's salvation is made up of his lovingkindness and faithfulness. That's what God is like, described by the Hebrew word *hesed*: compassionate, merciful, and faithful. And out of those qualities, God has turned toward humanity when we turned away, in order to rescue us, turn us around, and welcome us home. That's God's salvation, worked out through His Law, prophets, and ultimately, His anointed one, Jesus the Savior.

In verse 9, we also hear about God's coming judgment. That may seem like something to fear rather than to celebrate, but note that judgment doesn't come apart from salvation, but in the context of it. We should fear righteous judgment, for we all fall short of God's perfect holiness. But God's *hesed*, His mercy and love have made a way for us to be judged and be saved. That's Good News, or as the angels would announce at Christ's birth, "Good news of great joy!" With the birth of Christ, God's holy requirement would meet God's faithful love.

Joy Explained

Time for a Jesus story.

In John 16 the disciples start to worry because Jesus is talking about going away. They are starting to realize that something is about to happen. And in verses 19-22, Jesus tells them that they will weep and lament, they will grieve... for a while. But then it will turn to joy. I can imagine the confusion on their faces.

Then he makes this comparison (v.21): “Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish....”. Why?... “because of the JOY that a child has been born into the world.”

Now he’s not saying that a woman won’t remember the difficulties of labor. But he’s making the general comparison that the birth of a baby is not only the purpose of the labor, but something that (normally) brings great joy. Even if you haven’t given birth or been present at a birth, I think the comparison helps us understand what joy is about. It is what comes with deliverance after trial. Another scripture verse says that after the long night (of weeping), “joy comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30:5)

That’s one reason we have Advent before Christmas. We intentionally don’t skip right to joy because we recognize and live in the time of waiting, of struggling, often of grieving. But joy is coming! Joy is come!

We’ve talked a lot about 2020 being a uniquely challenging year. It has been full of suffering, waiting, and grieving for many and for many reasons. Rejoice, not because of the difficulty, but because God is merciful and just and is with us in 2020 just as He has been in every age and time. And you can count on that *hesed*... you can count on God’s compassion and faithfulness. God’s salvation is available now through Jesus Christ and God’s righteous judgment will one day set all things right.

That’s cause for joy, even now, especially now. Amen!