

“The Advent Conspiracy--Joy”

The Advent Conspiracy. Advent means that something is about to happen. Conspiracy is a plot to overthrow something. The arrival of Jesus, God with skin on, the God who would walk among us, is a plot to overthrow a life without meaning, a life without direction, a life that's empty. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is a plot to overthrow the jealousy that weakens us, the conflict that paralyzes us, the pettiness that keeps us from really living, the selfishness that chokes us to death. Advent was a conspiracy by God to overthrow darkness in your life and replace it with hope, peace, joy, love and more. Today we're talking about joy. Especially how we find joy in the midst of adversity.

Let's talk about joy for a minute. I don't know if you've ever tried to define a feeling, but when you try, it can be a real challenge. It's easier when we can relate it to something that generates that feeling. I have joyful feelings when my wife comes to me and says, "Aaron, I broke something..." You thought I was going to say something different, didn't you?! But really, some of my most joyful moments are when I get to fix something that's broken. I am The Fixer. There is great joy in figuring out to make things work. My friends know this about me and when their stuff breaks, they call me. I am joyful, I lose all track of time when I'm taking things apart and putting things back together.

I'm joyful when I'm with my family—especially Janet and the girls and we're playing games, or dancing in the living room (I love to dance), or eating out. Oh, yeah, eating! I feel a sense of joy when Janet and I get to go on a date, just the two of us, having a slow meal, no hurries. That brings me joy. Being outside. Reading. When the Chiefs win a football game. Using any kind of power tool. When I spend time with my friends just hanging out, playing games, talking, laughing. When I'm doing these things I feel joy.

As I say all that I realize that I feel joy when I am with people I love, doing things that I love, and in places that I love, or even just thinking about those things. But here's what we need to know. You can't always spend your entire life with people you love, doing things that you love, in places that you love, or thinking about things that you love. Because sometimes, you're going to be in places that are not like that.

I don't feel joy when I clean out the cat's litter box. We keep the litter box in a store room in the basement and last week the clumps were piled so high the cat had to be hitting his head on the rafters. I have since delegated that job to my very able and trustworthy eldest daughter, Zoe. I don't feel joy when I have to fill out any type of paper work, or insurance forms. I don't feel joy, when I look at my calendar and it's booked solid with to do's, and meetings, and events—even when some of those things are fun things. I don't feel joy when I'm in conflict with Janet or my kids, or anybody. No joy there. I don't feel joy when I'm throwing up—just never felt the joy of that. And I've never felt a sense of joy when I've lost somebody that I love.

We're not always going to live on the mountain top of joy. You get to live on the mountain top sometimes, those peak experiences of joy. But sometimes you're going to live in the valley of the shadow of death. And a lot of times you're going to be somewhere in between. And when we're in those times in the valley of the shadow of death or somewhere in between, we begin to miss joy. Sometimes we start to think, "I'm never going to feel joy again." We have a deep desire for it.

And your soul **needs** joy, like the vitamins your body needs. And when you have a vitamin deficiency it has an effect on your whole body. When you have a joy deficiency it has an effect on your soul. We need joy. And part of what we need to know is how to find joy when we're not on the mountain top. Let's look at that today.

My goal is for us to think about how we move from melancholy or sadness to joy. And one of the most important things we need to embrace is that joy is actually a by-product of doing other things. So that when you're in those times, or someone you know is in those times, seasons of adversity or sadness, or despair, there are things you can do about it based on our faith.

One thing you can do is give other people joy. **Joy is a by-product of giving other people joy.** It's interesting how this works, but when you try to bless other people and you try to give them joy, you find your own heart is lifted up in the process. I hear it all the time.

One of our small groups has adopted a cottage out at Turnaround Ranch. The kids in the cottage are kids on the fringe, many of them have faced abuse, neglect, worse. They have behavior problems and can't go to a normal school. They are seriously troubled kids. One of our home groups has adopted the cottage with the most troubled kids.

One of the things this small group does through the year is to throw a Christmas party for the kids there. They take them out for pizza and get the kids gifts, it's amazing the joy those kids receive, but what's even more, is the joy the people in that small group receive.

Two guys in my small group go over to Cecil Floyd elementary school and volunteer, one as a Lunch Buddy, one as a one-on-one tutor. They talk about the joy those kids get at seeing them walk in. AND those two me talk about the joy they have by doing that. You do a thousand different things like that in the Joplin area and it has an impact on so many people, and the result is great joy.

It works this way because the Bible teaches us that this was God's plan for human beings. That we were blessed to be a blessing; that we're to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; that we are to serve other people. And in the process of living into what you were made for, you find the joy of the Lord, which becomes your strength.

Ask any counselor, as any psychologist, ask any psychiatrist, read any self help book and they will all tell you, that if you are depressed, down, joyless, they will all tell you, do something that brings joy to others and you will find it yourself. It's God's plan for human beings.

Another thing about joy to apply to your life is this, **Joy is the by-product of a changed perspective on suffering.** Of seeing suffering differently. The Bible is filled with stories about suffering AND deliverance from suffering.

When you go into the Old Testament you find a whole category of literature that has to do with suffering. You know what scholars call that whole body of literature in the Old Testament, the stuff that's dealing with suffering? This is really great. They call it Wisdom Literature! Wisdom literature. Why would scholars call the literature dealing with suffering wisdom literature? Because wisdom comes from suffering. Wisdom, character, compassion, depth in a human personality, it all comes from walking through suffering.

The people you know who have the deepest character, I guarantee you that they're not people where everything's gone well in their lives, their whole lives. They're always people who've experienced suffering. We believe that God can me very good things come from our suffering.

I've been studying the book of Hebrews in the New Testament that last month or so. And in chapter 12 we read that, "**Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross...**" (Hebrews 12:2). What an interesting idea. For the joy set before him he endured the suffering of the cross. What was the joy set before him? As he's being nailed to the cross? It's not that he wanted the cross. Remember he prayed, "Father, take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done." He was hoping to avoid the pain but he was willing to do it for the joy set before him. While he's being nailed to the cross, what is he thinking about so he doesn't lose his mind? He's thinking about the fact that God will use his cross as an instrument of salvation and redemption for the world. "God, please in this suffering moment, use this to show them how much you love them. Use this to teach them about what's broken in humankind. Use this to help them come to understand and receive your grace and mercy. Use this to save them, O God." That's what gave him joy in the face of suffering. We change our perspective on suffering, and that leads to joy.

Betty McCoy wrote this on my Facebook page. *"Joy has a way of sneaking up on me everyday... I praise God for giving me eyes to see it and a heart to feel it and understand that the Joy comes from Him! Even though my life seems full of daily problems, stress and disappointments, as my walks brings me closer to Him, they don't seem so big...not insurmountable. He is faithful to bring Joy into my world and rainbows in the midst of storms."* When you begin to look at suffering, at difficult times, in a different way, from a different perspective it opens the possibility of joy.

I've recently spent a big chunk of time without much joy. Mostly because of what's gone on in the lives of people that I love a lot, and the chain reaction that took place from them to me. It was a time where I felt the absence of God in my life. I was doing all the things I've always done, praying, worshipping, leading you in worship, reading scripture. And at the same time I felt the deafening silence of God. I felt an absence of joy. I didn't feel God's presence. I had to go back to some of the foundational teachings I learned years ago. Some of the books that talked about the great Christians of the early church, and how lots of them described a period of their lives that they called the dark night of the soul. The dark night of the soul was a period where God was conspicuous by his absence. God was deafening by his silence.

Those great Christian thinkers and mystics came to know that those times created a greater desire for God than they had before. They began to listen more carefully for God, and that God, in that perceived absence, was actually doing something in their lives, they just couldn't see it at the time.

So I found myself just crying out to God, "Say something, do something, let me know you're there, let me know you're real, please something, anything. Anything." And I would also say, "God, whatever it is you're doing right now in me, please bring it to completion. If there's something you're trying to accomplish in me, or strip away from me, or plant in me, please don't let me interfere, but finish what you're wanting to do. Help me to come out the other side of this a better, deeper, more compassionate person, a better pastor. Use this in some way so that through this, I come out stronger."

Listen, that's the only thing that gave me joy in the midst of that very, very hard time in my spiritual life. The confidence, not in me, but in those who've been there before, that God uses those times to do something good, something deep, something powerful. God did, and God is.

In all of your lives, you know that the greatest experiences you have that have shaped you the most, are always the most painful ones. So you learn to give thanks in all circumstances, and know that God is going to be doing something through this, and you trust. It brings you a kind of joy in the midst of that.

Another thing about joy to apply to your life is this: **Joy is a by-product of trusting God.** One of the challenges in the middle of adversity is that we begin to think it's always going to be like this. You've lost your job, you've been looking for a job for a year, and you begin to believe, "I will never get another job." If you've struggled with depression you know how hopelessness it feels. You can begin to think, "What if I feel this way the rest of my life? What if I never laugh again? What if I never have joy again?" It's the thought of that that's unbearable.

Or if it's your marriage, you wonder, "What if we can never fix this?" Or if it's your health, "What if I'm sick and will never get any better?" All of this is that sense of despair and it begins to kick in in our minds when we're walking through difficult times.

One woman, sobbing said, "My life hurts so bad right now, that if you told me that by cutting off a leg, I could get rid of the pain, I would cut off my leg right now. If cutting off my arm would get rid of the pain, I would cut off my arm right now. I am in so much pain." But four weeks later, the clouds had broken, she was able to laugh, at least a little bit, and she felt some joy again.

What happens with us as Christians is that we trust that God works that way. That God will ALWAYS deliver us! That's the promise of scripture. Not that he'll make everything all better the way we wish it would be. But that he will somehow, some way deliver us.

To bring all this home, I want to really drill down on a passage of scripture. Isaiah chapter 12. Isaiah was a prophet around 730 B.C. And when he was prophesying he was speaking to the two small kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He's warning them, because they're starting to turn away from God. They were worshipping idols, ignoring justice, treating people like dirt. Isaiah warned them saying, "Listen, if you don't turn back to God and start living justly toward people, God is going to withdraw his hand of protection from you and the great empires to the east are going to sweep into this land and they are going to destroy you!" The people didn't listen, they didn't repent.

The Assyrian Empire and, later, the Babylonian empire, swept in and utterly destroyed the Israel and Judah, burned the cities to the ground, destroyed the Temple, murdered thousands, and took thousands more away as slaves.

All that is the first few chapters of the book of Isaiah—it's a bitter, bitter scene. Then in chapter 12 you get to words of comfort. Isaiah begins to say to the people, before they're carried off into slavery, that there will come a day when they will be released from their slavery. That they will come back home and they will sing songs of joy. So check this out, Isaiah gives them songs, songs of joy for deliverance yet to come. Because it's going to be 150 years before the people come back home. But God says, "I will bring you back and you will sing again." This is the song, **"In that day you will say... 'I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.'...Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you"** (Isaiah 12:1-6). That was a song of joy for a deliverance yet to come. They had decades of pain before their deliverance. While the people were living in Babylon for 50 years, they began to sing this song over and over again trusting that God would deliver them, even when they couldn't see it yet.

You know, when we sing something happens. We move from knowing something with our head, to knowing it with our hearts, and it helps us experience joy in the midst of adversity. And that's exactly what happened for them.

And here's the thing, these songs of joy for deliverance yet to come, are for you and me to. God has made promises to us, and they are real, that even in the midst of the hard stuff, whether that's of our own doing or someone else's, we can sing songs of joy because deliverance is coming.

Let me end with this. There is something about singing that's really important. The Bible is filled with songs. Mary sang with joy when she found out she was pregnant, even though she wasn't married yet, and could be put to death for it. What does she do? She sings! It's not by accident that the longest book of the Bible, the book of Psalms, is a book of songs. 150 chapters of songs for people to sing when they are sad. Songs to sing when they're happy. Songs to sing when they're terrified, when they're angry, when they're lonely—so that their faith might move from their head to their heart and they might feel hope, and peace, and even joy.

When Paul and Silas are in prison in Philippi, locked away, their hands and feet shackled, they've been beaten, they're bruised and wounded. What do they do? They sing songs of joy for deliverance yet to come.

The Christmas season is a season when we sing, isn't it? I mean, you probably don't have any other hymns memorized, but have about all of the Christmas carols memorized. You turn on the secular radio stations and they're playing our songs, every day, 24 hours a day. You go into the shopping mall and they're playing our songs! And you know all those that are specifically religious in nature, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Joy to the World, the First Noel, they're all, when you look at them, songs of joy for a deliverance yet to come.

When we sing them, and really connect with them, our faith connects from here in our heads, to here in our hearts, so whether life is great, or life is full of pain, you begin to find joy. When Jesus was born the angel said to the terrified shepherds, **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).** Then a huge army of angels shouted, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace and good will to all people.” This was the first Christmas carol, shouted by the angels announcing the birth of a savior who would bring a deliverance yet to come.

You know, the shepherds wouldn't have celebrated and had that joy had the angel not come and told them that there was a Christ who was born. The word angel literally means messenger. Anybody could be a messenger. You know people in your relational world who are in a season of darkness. You know somebody who is struggling relationally, or financially, or emotionally, or somebody who is grieving. Those people need to know that there is joy. They need to sing. Your friends who don't go to church, if they miss out on Christmas Eve, they may never sing these songs of joy if you don't ask them.

What if you were the messenger who invited them to come to worship, to come with you on Christmas Eve, and you just told them, “It's awesome! We sing Christmas carols and we listen to the story of the birth of Jesus, and at the end it's really cool because there's fire. Our pastor has this thing about fire! And we pass the flame and we end by singing Silent Night. It's awesome, why don't you come with us?” And you know, because you asked them, they would probably say yes. And I hear stories every year about how somebody's faith journey is started up again, or is started for the very first time, on Christmas Eve. You could be a messenger of joy.

My hope and prayer for you is that you would experience joy, by sharing joy, by changing your perspective on suffering, by trusting God, by being a messenger of joy. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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