

December 29th, 2024

Isaiah 9:2-3 “Don’t Forget to Laugh”

Some of you may have seen my post on social media this past week about finding a little Yorkshire terrier in the church parking lot. Kari Zeitler is helping us find her humans. I hope she finds her humans, but if she doesn’t? Well, I wouldn’t say “no” to adopting her. Which reminds me of a story about a woman who adopted a dog on Craigslist.

After she adopted the dog, she invited her friend over to show it off. Her friend said, “Aw, what a beautiful dog. Where did you get him?” “Ad on Craigslist. He was listed as a Christian Dog.” “Really? That’s odd.” “Yeah, but check this out. Samson! Go fetch my Bible!” The dog runs into the next room and comes back with a Bible. “Wow! That’s impressive.” “I know, right? Watch this. Samson! Turn to the Psalm 23.” The dog flips through the pages to the 23rd Psalm. “No way!” “Yeah. Ask him to turn to a scripture.” Her friend said, “Samson! Turn to Deuteronomy 19:21.” The dog flipped through the Bible and put his paw on the verse. “Huh ...that’s weird.” “No, what’s weird is when you ask him to look up a verse you already know.” “Oh, okay ... ummm ... Find, ‘Jesus wept.’” The dog flipped over to John 11 and put his paw on verse 35. “Damn!” The dog growled, “Language please.” “Oh! So sorry.” The dog’s tail wags. “So does Samson do like regular dog tricks?” “I don’t know. Give is a try.” So the friend said, “Samson! Sit!” The dog sat. “Lay down and roll over!” The dog laid down and rolled over. “Go for a walk?” The dog ran into the other room and came back with his leash.” The friend said, “Good boy! Heel!” The dog jumped up on the couch, laid his paws on the friend, closed his eyes and said, “God almighty in the name of Jesus, release this dear sister from her affliction!” The owner said, “Oh dear heavens! The ad didn’t say he was Pentecostal!”

Strange joke to start out with considering that we’re five days into the twelve days of Christmas. Also, I don’t often tell jokes from the pulpit. Maybe I’ll share a story or an experience that I think might make you

laugh, but jokes? Not your usual forte there pastor. Yeah, but Christmas is a season of joy and laughter, right? Well joy, sure, but laughter? That's more "Jingle Bells" than "O, Holy Night." During the 12 days between December 25th and epiphany, we are celebrating the birth of the one whose reign will change the world as we know it. So yes, "rejoice!" But jokes about talking dogs? I don't know if that's what the writers meant when they said, "Rejoice!" Well, according to Proverbs 17:22, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Okay, sure. But jokes are – I don't know, a little pedestrian for church maybe? Let's try something else. Something more grounded in reality.

True story: A department manager for a shipping company was sitting at his desk when a message from a co-worker popped up on his computer. The message read - "Hey, do you know Jesus? If so, have you talked to him today?" The manager was confused for a moment. Why was his coworker being like this? So he hit reply and said, "First of all, I'm not religious, and secondly I don't appreciate you trying to convert me at work." His coworker wrote back, "Nooo! Jesus, in marketing. Like, 'hay-zoos'! Spanish name! Sorry, I don't know how to type the U with the little line above it on the keyboard. Anyway, he's late, so I was wondering if you knew where he was."

Well. At least that joke mentioned Jesus ... sort of. Still not sure what the point is, but you need to stay in your wheelhouse, pastor. You're not a stand-up comedian. Okay. How about a church joke?

A mother went to wake her son for church one Sunday morning. When she knocked on his door, he said, "I'm not going!" She said, "Why not?" "I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "One, they don't like me. Two, I don't like them." His mother replied, "I'll give you two good reasons why YOU WILL go to church. One, you're 47 years old. Two, you're the pastor!" I've got one more. This is a Christmas joke.

There once was a family who had a child that was so overly optimistic it made her parents worry. Remember last week when we were talking

about well-meaning parents who say, “Don’t get your hopes up” to their kids? These are the parents I’m talking about. This little girl faced every day with a smile on her face and saw the silver lining in every cloud. There was nothing that could upset this kid. She was a little bulldozer of happiness crashing through everyone else’s gloom. Her mom thought it was precious, but her father who was a hardened cynic wasn’t sure what to do with her. He’d say things like, “Not everything in life is a bouquet of roses.” Or, “You shouldn’t be so trusting.” And of course he’d say, “Don’t get your hopes up.” But it was like telling water not to be wet. One Christmas her dad said, “I’ve had enough. This kid needs to learn that life is difficult. This kid needs to understand that things don’t always go the way we’d like. What kind of adult is she going to grow up to be if she just plows through life thinking nothing bad will ever happen? I need to teach her a lesson.” So he went to the store and bought the fanciest box he could find and on the way home from the store, he stopped at a horse pasture and looked for the biggest pile of manure he could find. Once he found the perfect pile of manure – not too fresh, not too stale -- he scooped it into the box, took it home and wrapped it in cheerful holiday wrapping paper and tied a beautiful bow on it. On Christmas Eve, he put the box under the tree for his obnoxiously optimistic daughter and said, “There! She’ll have to learn about disappointment one of these days, so it might as well be on Christmas when she has the highest expectations.” On Christmas morning, the little girl opened the box. The smell was horrible. Everyone in the room was doing their best to suppress their gag reflex. But the little girl said, “Yay! What a blessing!” The dad was dumbstruck. How could his daughter think this was a good gift? This was worse than getting a lump of coal. Finally he said, “Why do you think this is a good gift? Don’t you know what this means?” She said, “Yes I do! It means there’s a pony around here somewhere!”

Okay, enough Pastor. Please. Just stop. Fine. Laughter doesn't just lighten our spirits; it invites us to see the world through a lens of divine playfulness. Happiness is fleeting, but joy is a deep-seated feeling that comes from something bigger than ourselves. Joy remains even in the

face of adversity, reminding us of the hope and love that surrounds us at all times and in all circumstances. Joy is a sacred invitation to lessen our self-seriousness and remember that the God of all things often subverts our notions of what is holy. In our cold world, joy is the sweater we can wrap ourselves in, offering comfort and protection against the elements. If we refuse to wear the joy that Christ extends us, what does that say about who's most important in our lives? It sure isn't Christ. The One who is compassionate and knows every sorrow also knows we are not meant to absorb every pain of this world. A posture of joy releases control and allows God to be God. Yes, we must be present to the pain, but we are also invited to an invincible joy that is freely given. When we let go of our self-importance and allow joy to cover our hearts with gladness and gratitude, we bring Christ back into the center of our lives.

In scripture, joy and laughter are presented as responses to God's action and imperatives that invite us to celebrate the divine playfulness in creation. Consider the shepherds in Luke 2:10 and the Magi in Matthew 2:10. Profound joy punctuates their encounters with God. Their reactions to the news of Jesus' birth are more than just moments of happiness. Their reactions are transformative experiences, theological revelations that invite them—and us—to view the world and our place in it through a lens of wonder and delight. Funny that these joyful reactions are in the second chapter and tenth verse of both gospels. Coincidence? Maybe.

The shepherds, who were often overlooked in society, were bathed in heavenly light and received the joyous news of a savior's birth—a message meant especially for them, reminding us that joy often chooses the least likely recipients. Their immediate, uncontainable joy bubbles up and over as they spread the good news of what they've seen and heard, embodying the contagious nature of divine delight. Can you imagine the ridiculous spectacle of a gaggle of shepherds pulling up to the place where Jesus was born? In faith, they suspended any self-seriousness they might have had in order to burst into the de facto delivery room to see if what the angels said really was true. And what do you know? It was. Joy is for everyone, regardless of their status or

position. Same with the Magi who were guided by the light of a star and discovered not just a child, but a joyful fulfillment of ancient prophecies. Joy invites us not to turn our faces from the harsh realities of our world but instead gives us strength for the long and winding journey. The Magi's journey culminated in worship and laughter in the presence of Jesus, symbolizing the profound joy in realizing one's long-held hopes. As Matthew 2:10 tells us, "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

Isaiah 9:2-3 enriches this imagery, depicting the joy of the people as they witness God's light piercing through the darkness. Compared to celebrating a bountiful harvest or sharing the spoils after a victory, this joy is both a divine gift and a human response. Your joy matters, allowing you to let go of control, trust in the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit, and open yourself to the sacred joy that forms. Often, we are focused only on what seems possible and realistic. But joy flows from the impossible. If God was revealed to stargazers and shepherds, what might God have in store for you? We have a God who manifested as an infant gurgling and giggling ... as a toddler tickled and erupting into laughter. If we allow it, joy can simplify our perspectives and make us more receptive to the wonder and playfulness of God.

Here's your reflection question for the morning - What would it look like to embrace laughter as a spiritual practice this week? Try watching a comedy show or spending time with those who make you laugh. Make room in your heart for delight. Joy is a sacred invitation to shed our self-importance and wrap our hearts in the gladness and gratitude that come from knowing Christ is at the center of our lives. Joy is much more than just fleeting happiness. Joy sustains us with the hope and love that envelop us in all circumstances. And that's no small thing. Turn to your neighbor and say, "The joy of the Lord is our strength." Did that feel weird? I hope it's exactly what you needed to hear.

Blessing: As you navigate the cold complexities of our weary world, wrap yourself in joy's warm embrace. May you accept the invincible joy that Christ freely offers—a joy that assures you that you are known, loved, and forever held within God's compassionate embrace. May the joy of the Lord be your strength, helping you stay awake to wonder and awe when the darkness of the world closes in.