

## Advent Joy

We were greeted today by the light of two Advent candles, representing the previous weeks' themes of Hope and Peace... to that we will add the light of the third candle for this week's theme of Joy.



There are a number of short passages in Scripture that become part of our vernacular... maybe we use them as a saying, or put them on inspirational posters, or sing them in songs. They stand alone just fine, even without their context... but I don't always know where they come from.

Here's one that lines up nicely with our Advent theme this week:

the joy of the LORD is your strength<sup>1</sup>

If I had to go searching without all the handy electronic gadgets (or even a concordance), I probably would have started looking somewhere in the New Testament, or perhaps in the Psalms.

Anyone know where it is? It is in Nehemiah

8:10. Nehemiah, himself, said it to the people as they rebuilt Jerusalem, and returned to the Lord and His Word.



If I thought that sermon titles had any power to draw people to church on Sunday mornings, I might have opted to do the math, making this a better title than simply *Advent Joy*.



If joy = strength... then we could say that this isn't merely Advent **Joy** Sunday; this is Advent Strength Sunday.

That might appeal to people. Could you use some Advent Strength? There are all sorts of things that might drain our strength at this time of the year in any year.



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<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

- For some, the rhythm of our work and business adds an extra burden as we close out the year. Many enjoy some time off here at the end of the year... but that extracts a toll as the work needs to be buttoned-up before any vacationing can begin.
- The season itself brings extra work as we plan and purchase gifts, host visitors, or travel ourselves. For many, the extra work is a real burden.
- For some the season takes an emotional toll. It could be that strained or broken relationships are more apparent during this season. Or there could be memories of past disappointments that are especially vivid at this time of the year.

That is just any year during this season... but this isn't any year; this is 2020, for a few more weeks. Is anyone tired, worn out, exhausted? 2020 has had a way to do that to us all.

Are we weak and weary, or just fed up? Tapped out? Drained? Hear the word of the Lord on this third Sunday of Advent:

the joy of the LORD is your strength<sup>2</sup>

Whatever may be sapping our strength (physically or emotionally, real or imaginary, relationally or financially), this is God's word for us today: the joy of the Lord is your strength. We can even make it more personal and say: the joy of the Lord is **our** strength. Or we can even make it more personal: the joy of the Lord is **my** strength.

I have a few things to say about Joy (more specifically, the Joy of the Lord), from Nehemiah, as well as the Gospel of John.

If you'd like four points, they are:

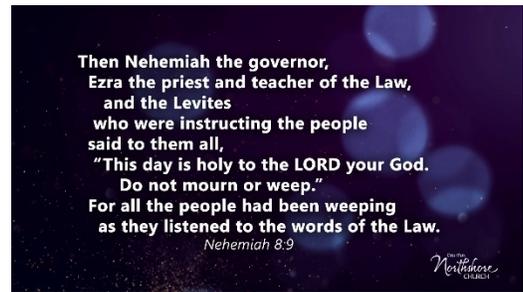
1. Joy Lost
2. Joy Far Off
3. Joy With Us
4. Joy Shared

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<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Let's start with Nehemiah 8:9.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.<sup>3</sup>



Nehemiah the governor, and Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, each with a book named after them in our Old Testaments... they date around 440 BC. It is in a context where joy was lost by God's people. These are stories of God's people returning from exile. The days of David and Solomon gave way to evil leaders and an entire people who lost their way.

In spite of God's perseverance, and warnings delivered by the prophets, they persisted in evil doing. Finally, as was prophesied, their cities were decimated, and they were carried off to Persia.

But, also according to what was prophesied, they returned. First Ezra, returning to rebuild the Temple, and then Nehemiah came to fortify Jerusalem, providing a safe place to live and worship.

For the vast majority of those former exiles, they were starting from scratch. It was back to basics, worshipping again at the Temple and reinstating feast days.

Their exile lasted a few generations, 70 years or so... long enough for things to be forgotten, long enough for those with firsthand experience to pass away.

Their exile lasted a few generations; our exile is approaching a year. Contrary to the belief of many on see on social media, we are not exactly in captivity, not even exiled really. But we're all inconvenienced, most are significantly impacted in one way or another, and some remain isolated... and, while there is an end in sight, it will continue for the coming months.

We will return from "exile" and have to rebuild. Economies and businesses will need rebuilding. Schools may never be the same. And our churches will go through some manner of rebuilding. If we aren't thinking what will be required to rebuild our lives, families, economies, churches and all... well, we ought to be thinking about the coming rebuild.

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<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

That's where God's people found themselves under Nehemiah's leadership. Not merely rebuilding the walls of their city, but rebuilding their lives. The basis of it all was rediscovering God's Word. This is the scene of Nehemiah 8. Ezra stood in the public square on a wooden platform and read God's Word aloud. Around him were others, Levites, charged with interpreting and explaining what Ezra read.

Rebuilding started with God's Word; let's take that with us in our rebuilding... a renewed commitment to God's Word.

As they were rediscovering God through His Word, they were rediscovering joy... yet it was still far off. As they heard God's Word, they were confronted with their sin, both their own and the sin of their people throughout the ages. How could they have been so lost? Why did it take such pain and suffering to bring them back? There was, rightfully so, genuine mourning and repentance. There was weeping.

But to all that, in that mournful context, Nehemiah and Ezra said, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep."

There is a cycle apparent and repeated in the Bible that goes something like this:

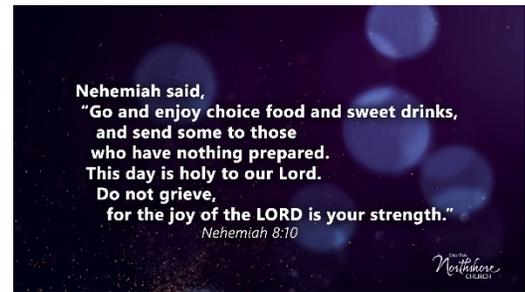
1. Confession
2. Cleansing, and
3. Celebration

The people were confronting and confessing their sin. Hearing God's Word revealed God's holiness as well as their weakness and failings. They found cleansing through repentance and reinstating worship, both through sacrifice at the Temple and worship through calendar (special days). It appears that this scene in Nehemiah 8 included Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is the most holy day in the Jewish calendar, a day of prayer and repentance, focusing on atonement for sin.

But confession alone was not enough, nor was cleansing; to this needed to be added celebration.

<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” <sup>4</sup>

A time of **grieving** was appropriate. But that alone would not bring strength.



A season of **cleansing** was called for. But that would not bring strength either.

After confession and cleansing, reflecting on the goodness, and grace, and mercy of God... then comes **celebration**.

“Choice food and sweet drinks”... could there be any of that in our future in the days ahead?

We have our traditions here at Northshore, most are derived and synthesized from various Christian traditions. We pick and choose and mix things together, and it appears that most of you like most of what we do.

You may know that we do Advent wrong, at least from the most traditional perspectives. We pick and choose Advent themes, and do things like light Advent candles in an Advent wreath... but we celebrate Christmas throughout Advent. A stricter, traditional approach to Advent would restrict any celebration of Christmas until midnight of Christmas Day... no carols, no decorations, no Merry Christmas until Christmas Day. But we, conforming a bit to culture I suppose, mix it all together.

There is something to that traditional approach to Advent, an approach that focuses on the anticipation leading up to the celebration... an approach that even embraces confession of sin and cleansing from sin prior to the celebration of Christmas.

I suppose we may lose something by jumping right into the celebration of it all. But, on the other hand... I am really glad for the joyful celebration of it all... so we'll just persist in doing it wrong.

The encouragement in Nehemiah's day was to complete the cycle, moving from confession and cleansing to celebration.

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<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It would, of course, be a cycle. There would be days of confession and cleansing again. Another Day of Atonement would come again the next year, and the next... the cycle would continue. But on that day, in that season, the priority was celebration.

There is cause for celebration. There is a real need for celebration.

Celebration is different this year. Most of our traditional celebrations have been significantly modified; some have been canceled. Let's be sure not to skip celebration because celebration is vitally important. Is anyone tempted to, or even planning to, just skipping it all this year? (I know some are, at least according to the news... and by "the news" I mean Facebook.)

It is likely more work, requiring more effort and some creativity, and it will all be different... but, friends, it is important to celebrate.

the joy of the LORD is your strength<sup>5</sup>

So there was Joy Lost, and Joy Far Off... but what about our Advent perspective? What about a Christmas perspective?

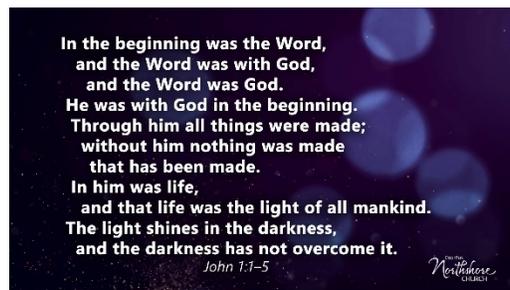
The scene in Nehemiah was centered on the public reading of God's Word by Ezra. It was God's Word that brought the people near to God, which caused them to realize, confront, and confess sin... that called them to repentance and cleansing... and ultimately resulted in celebration.

Does Advent give us an important perspective?

When it comes to the four Gospels, two start by telling the Christmas story in the familiar way, as an historical event. But the Gospel of John starts from a more theological perspective.

The Gospel of John starts by saying:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. <sup>6</sup>



<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 1:1-5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

In Nehemiah, the Word of God was far off from the people, read from a platform, understood only by special study and explanation. But in the Gospel of John, the Word of God is introduced as close, present, and among us. The Word of God is introduced as a *person*: Jesus.

Jesus, the very Word of God, came into the world. Emmanuel, God With Us, has come. He came so that what was far off could now be present and near.

He came not just for a momentary visit; Jesus came to be The Way... so that we could be with Him now, and for all eternity.

He came, and for us who receive Him...

to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. <sup>7</sup>

How could the Word of God, the Joy and Strength of God, be any more near? Be any more present? Any more ours?

The ultimate celebration of Christmas is to receive Jesus. To believe. To seize that right as a child of God... to be born of God.

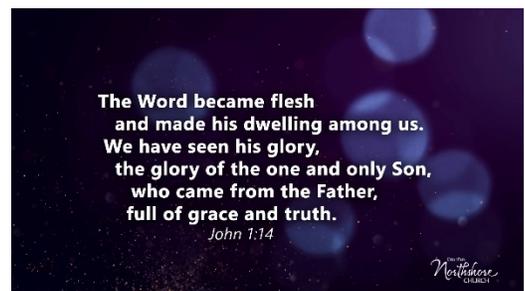
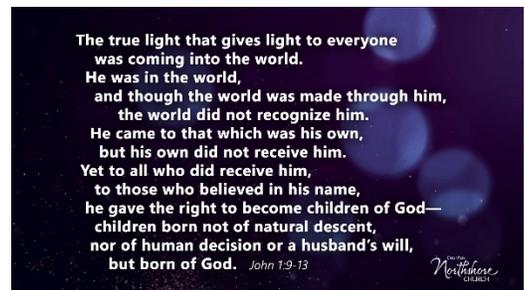
Make today your day and believe. Believe again. Or even believe for the first time. You can join this celebration today. Start with a simple prayer: Jesus, I believe.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. <sup>8</sup>

Joy With Us. This changes everything.

Think about that cycle: confession – cleansing – celebration.

For the Christian, this cycle takes on a new meaning. When we believe, that cycle is turned upside down. Without the Gospel, without the Good News of Jesus, that cycle repeats out of a basis of confession. Apart from the grace and mercy of God



<sup>7</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 1:9–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>8</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 1:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

(which was certainly present in the OT as well... but that is another sermon), the cycle is always based in the reality of sin, in confession of sin with occasional cleansing and celebration.

But for the Christian, once we believe and complete that cycle... confessing our sin, and receiving the cleansing that only Jesus can bring, then we are given a new basis in celebration.

Without the Gospel, sin is our natural state... but with the Gospel celebration is our new natural state.

I suppose that for those who believe, every day is Christmas... not merely an annual occasion to drag us out of our lowly estate to celebrate for a mere day or season, but a new life of celebration.

Sure, there is confession and cleansing, but our confession and cleansing is a celebration of what Jesus has done and is doing in us. When we confess our sin, it is a confession based in the assurance of forgiveness that is already accomplished by Jesus. When we repent, seeking cleansing... it is repentance based in the assurance of forgiveness. All of it is based in a celebration of what Jesus has accomplished.

So, in and through Jesus, the Joy of the Lord is truly our strength.

It sounds pretty simple and straightforward, doesn't it? "The joy of the Lord is our strength."

But is it always that simple, even at this time of the year? Maybe especially at this time of the year?

Let's remember:

1. There is Joy. Let's not gloss over this rudimentary basic truth. There is joy for us... joy of the Lord. Consider what you know about other religions. Do other Gods offer joy? Do other Gods purchase joy like Jesus has for us? When we believe the Gospel, receiving God's gift of grace through faith in Jesus, we understand that God does not expect mere mourning and weeping, but rather gives us joy.
2. Joy of the Lord is based in the Word of God. Reading, knowing, studying, feasting on God's Word is the source of joy. We can turn to God's Word for joy.



3. Jesus, the Word of God personified, is present and is the root of true joy. When we find ourselves joyless, focusing on Jesus restores our joy, and renews our strength.
4. Joy is to be shared... and is only magnified in the sharing.

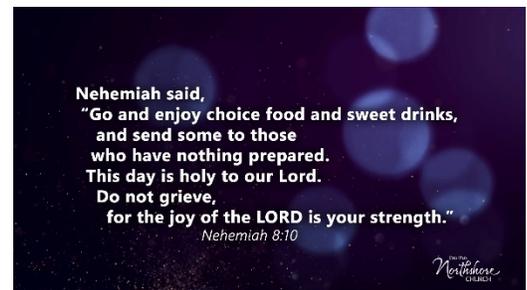
We must share at Christmas. Sharing is the most practical, and powerful, way to increase joy... in our own lives, and in the lives of those around us.

In most cases when we share that means less for us, right? The math is simple. One for you and one for me is sharing, but that means there are not two for me.

But not so with joy... when joy is shared it only increases. When we find ourselves joyless, we can reorient ourselves by sharing and bringing joy to others.

This is demonstrated in the Nehemiah text.

“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, **and send some to those who have nothing prepared.** This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”<sup>9</sup>



To the poor in resources, share the wealth. For those who can't celebrate, we share what we have. In this season there are great opportunities to share. Food drives, toy drives and such present us with ways to share our joy.

There are those who are sad, and even a few that are mad, that we are not meeting together in our building on Christmas Eve like we traditionally do with carols and our choir and candles and all. We weighed the directives from the Governors office, and our own concerns for your health and safety, and all of our options, and determined that the best answer this year was an online-only answer. (By the way... we have some cool things planned; I'm confident it will be really good. You will not want to miss it.)

We determined that there were at least two higher priorities than our Christmas Eve traditions. First, we're committed to Sunday worship, both in-person and online. The second priority... our Food Bank, and the special things we do with the Christmas Store and all.

Sure... I really miss traditions that we've significantly adjusted this year, traditions we've held for years, and will certainly continue next year... but when

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<sup>9</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

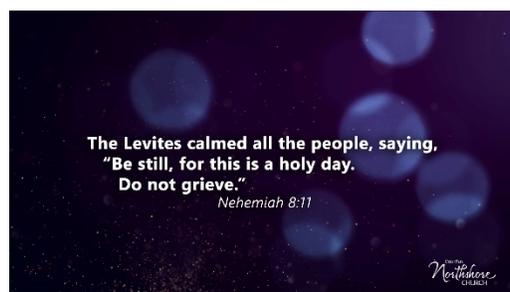
I'm in my right mind, and I consider God's Word before us today, the most joyous, joyful, and joy-multiplying things we do are in the sharing.

If somehow you think Christmas is canceled or ruined... if our joy has been tapped or sapped, perhaps we should put this principle to the test. Try giving. Try sharing. Choose generosity. Serve (there are still a lot of ways to help, sign up with Jenni). I am certain our joy will increase as we share.

It is a turn from an inward-focus to an outward-focus. That is what was going on in verse 11:

<sup>11</sup>The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."<sup>10</sup>

This was a call to stop with the weeping and wailing, to put an end to focusing on what was lost, what had failed, what was behind, and to celebrate with what was ahead. Sometimes when we say "be still" it is a matter of toning down the celebration so that we can contemplate God, but here the "be still" is a call to stop with the weeping and wailing, to stop grieving, and to share the celebration.

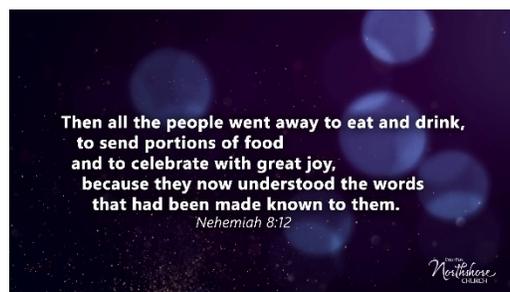


But more than just those who are poor in resources who maybe can't prepare to celebrate, there are those who simply haven't prepared. This is a season to bring people into the joy of the celebration.

When we read on, we see that the people did just that (v.12):

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.<sup>11</sup>

Notice that it appears that some were swept up in the celebration, gathered in at that celebration stage.



Let's be sure to invite people into the celebration. It might take some extra effort and creativity this year, but we can still invite people to know Jesus, but our words and deeds and even our attitudes. This is a time for celebration, celebration that could change eternity for some.

<sup>10</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>11</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ne 8:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Sometimes we can be religious snobs, only really inviting people in at the front door of the cycle. We may want people to come in *the right way*... first with confession, then cleansing, and then celebration. I think this text encourages us to let people get swept in with the celebration. There will be time for confession and cleansing... let people be gathered in as they join in the celebration.

Let's be generous in every way. With our time. With our patience. With our mercy, grace, and forgiveness. With our service. With our attitudes. Let's do all we can to open the doors and share the celebration.

As we close today, we'll pray. Our prayer today is for joy.

I've been thinking of a traditional song: O Come All Ye Faithful.



What are the next words?

Joyful and triumphant.

God, give us gifts of joy and triumph. Whatever our circumstances, we are triumphant... not because of our victories, personally or nationally or otherwise... but we are triumphant because Jesus makes us so.

Our joy and triumph is rooted in faith, and our worship of the one who gives us joy and triumph.

O come all ye faithful  
Joyful and triumphant...  
Come and behold Him  
Born the King of angels...  
Glory to God  
Glory in the highest...  
Yea Lord we greet Thee...  
Jesus to Thee be all glory giv'n  
Word of the Father  
Now in flesh appearing  
O come let us adore Him