

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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AUGUST 17, 2008



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### Where is the Joy?

Where is the Joy? I am learning in my life to ask God about many things so of course I turned to him several weeks ago with the question of what the message should be this morning. I then sat back to listen for the response. What he put on my heart was that I should talk about the "Joy". I thought that was a great topic. ("Thank you God"). As I reflected on it I thought it would be up-lifting, everyone would leave feeling good and go out and start the week or at the very least spend their Sunday in a "good place". The problem was, at the time when I had that put on my heart, I wasn't feeling the joy. Do you ever feel like that?

It seems to me that the last few months, maybe longer, there have been some really tough times around here. People we love making incredibly poor decisions, riddled with sickness, hearing medical diagnoses that we know mean lengthy treatment or even eventual death. People we love battling with forces and demons that are beyond our comprehension, sometimes forces that change them into people we don't even recognize any more. Unexpected deaths of loved ones and family members that seem to rock our world and have us shaking our head in wonderment of "when is it going to end" or having feelings like "this just isn't fair". And that is just in our congregation! That doesn't begin to address the struggles in our community, on Long Island, in the state, in our great country or in the world beyond.

How does one find the joy amidst these kinds of storms?

Where is the joy the Bible promises over and over again:

In Isaiah 55:12 it tells us "You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace..." Psalm 118:15 sings out "Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous...the Lord's hand has done mighty things". Isaiah 61:10 says "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God.....".

Even with all of these promises I will venture a guess that many of you struggle as I do at times with feeling the joy. Pastor Vibert preached a sermon reflecting this topic in July entitled "God's Discipline?" answering the question in the "Ask the Pastor" series about enduring God's hardships. Bruce Miller preached a sermon several weeks ago about "Wishes versus Values" encouraging us to have hopeful expectations in spite of unanswered wishes. Book store shelves are full of self help books. Movies, songs, talk shows, even advertisements for different products promise to make us better, healthier more joyful people.

There are also many hymns and songs about hardship and weathering the storms of life. Casting Crowns, a contemporary Christian music band sings a song called "Praise Him in the Storm". Some of the more poignant words sung amidst lots of drums and powerful instrumental music are;

*"I was sure by now,  
that you would have reached down  
and wiped our tears away,*

*stepped in and saved the day.  
But once again I say "Amen"  
and its still raining.  
As the thunder rolls  
I barely hear you whisper through the rain  
"I'm with you".  
And as your mercy falls,  
I raise my hands and praise the God who  
gives  
and takes away.  
I praise you in this storm and I will lift  
my hands,  
for you are who you are, no matter where  
I am.  
And every tear I've cried,  
you hold in your hand, you never left my  
side,  
and though my heart is torn.  
I will praise you in this storm."*

I have listened to that song many times with tears streaming down my face asking God to help me praise him the midst of a storm. I will tell you that sometimes it is a major challenge to stop crying, let alone to get to the point where I could literally or figuratively lift my hands and praise Him.

Joyce Meyer, a wonderful preacher who speaks quite bluntly about some of her struggles in life has a powerful message that she presents in a humorous way. I will call it "It's not about me". After hearing this message several times from her on the radio I was moved to purchase a book about a month ago written by Max Lucado called "*It's not about Me*" with a subtitle "*Rescue from the Life We Thought Would Make us Happy*". Now who wouldn't pick up a book that promised to rescue us from life? Who in this room doesn't have a day, a month or for some of us, years of feeling a need to be rescued. Rescued from life, from those in our lives, or maybe in some cases, from ourselves! We are desperate for rescue! By the way, this book is a sure cure for those of us who have any kind of "me-centered"

thinking, either thoughts of self-pity of self pride or, both depending upon the day.

I would like to suggest that in order to find the joy we need a shift in the direction of our gaze and a redefining of those "hopeful expectations" that Bruce spoke about several weeks ago. Faith is absolutely about having hopeful expectations, about believing in things unseen. Faith is a necessity as a Christian. As Joyce Meyer and Max Lucado very eloquently and humorously state, our problem is that we forget what the Bible promises about joy and what our place is in the cosmos. I would love to be able to tell you differently but the fact is; it is absolutely NOT about us or our joy. That may sound simplistic but if we really plant that in our hearts and digest that in our guts, it is for many of us a major life shift in our focus. God did not put us here to make us happy. God put us here to make HIM happy. God put us here to serve Him and to glorify Him. It is in doing his will that we feel the joy.

This is where some of you are going to lose focus and start thinking about what it is you have planned to do this afternoon. We don't want to hear again about what we should be doing to serve God or how we should volunteer at church or in the community. Who has the time? Who has the energy? Perhaps you are saying to yourselves "Is she kidding, does she know what I have on my plate?" Listen to me, to borrow a line from the back of Max Lucado's book, "There really is more to this life than you've been told". Friends, this is not about church or about volunteering; this is about living the life you were set here to live. This is about giving up your dreams for His. It's about opening your heart to God's promises.

Our first reading this morning Psalm 121 is one of the Psalms of Ascent. There are 15 Psalms of Ascent that are traditionally thought of as songs that were sung by the Jews as they returned from captivity from Babylon and regularly as they traveled to Jerusalem for their feasts and celebrations.

The Psalm starts out talking about lifting our eyes to the hills. That is easy to imagine as you think about travelers walking to and from Jerusalem and perhaps being exhausted from the trip. But, what if we think about those hills as being all of the challenges that life places in our path. There are days when we feel like life is indeed a mountain to be climbed and sometimes we don't even have the energy to take the first step. You wonder "Where am I going to get the strength to do this?" The answer is right there folks. "Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." Ask him, trust him.

Some of you are thinking, "She has no idea. She doesn't know the struggles I have". You know I praise God for anointing people like Peter who can, week after week stand up here and deliver a meaningful message about God. Several weeks ago as this date approached, covered in self-doubt, I began wondering why it was that I agreed to do this. It was about that time that God put on my heart to recall our recent experience here with Vacation Bible School. Each day at VBS we have a simple Bible Point message that we repeat over and over again to get it across to the kids and to the adults too I guess. This year's theme for the week was **Jesus' Power** and each day we taught about Jesus' power to help us do something. On the last day the Bible point message was that Jesus gives us the power to tell others about God. After breathing a sigh of relief I was comforted by the fact that if we can ask four to ten year olds to go tell people about God, with Jesus power perhaps he would give me the ability to share some thoughts with you.

Feeling the pressure of needing to find the words to speak to the topic God had put on my heart, "Joy?", I was quite thankful that God's timing had me going on a planned vacation. I would surely find "the joy" on vacation. The vacation started in Niagara Falls. I was quite certain that if I was patient I would get to the Falls and amidst the power I would hear the words that God wanted me

to share with you. We had a wonderful trip to the Falls. They are indeed majestic. It is amazing to stand there and feel their power, or walk down the side of them and stand in the small bit of falls they allow you to get near and feel the might of a tiny bit of it splashing over you. But I didn't find the joy.

The latter half of our vacation had me taking the girls up to the very northern part of the state near the St. Lawrence River. My sister has a summer home on Lake Ontario. I thought I was certain to find the joy in the quietness of mornings at the lake and time spent with family. It was a wonderful visit. We did what a lot of families probably do on vacation, laughing and enjoying each others company. But, I didn't find the joy.

On Sunday morning my sister, my father and I attended a small country church in Chaumont, NY. We were welcomed with open arms by the parishioners and the minister who introduced herself as Pastor Rachel. I thought perhaps God would speak to me there in the quiet sanctuary with the stained glass windows and well-used hymnals. He did speak to me there, but it wasn't about joy.

One afternoon my sister and I took a short drive around the countryside and found ourselves talking about our faith. That is something we never spoke about growing up. It has come up recently since the sickness and death of my mom. I was talking to her a bit about the struggle I was having putting thoughts about joy together for a sermon. I said to her, I wish I could just open my heart and tell people what it is that a relationship with Jesus has done for my life. She said to me, "Why don't you just tell them that?"

So here goes. Life is not easy. God doesn't promise that it will be easy. He promises to be our strength if we have faith, turn to him and trust his plan and his timing. There are many mornings that the only thing that gives me the energy to get out of bed is the faith that God will take care of me. There have been long seasons in my life when I

don't know how I am going to survive the day, let alone the rest of my life. It is the knowledge in my heart that God's ways are so much better than our ways, the promise from him in Psalm 121 that he never slumbers and will not let us slip that brings comfort and yes, at times joy in knowing he's there. I know that is hard to reconcile with the storms of life.

There is something that kicked me in the gut recently, while standing at a funeral that came much too early and much too unexpectedly for a beloved member of this congregation. There was something that felt so wrong about looking at a flower arrangement that said "mom" with little purple hearts on the ribbon. An arrangement that I knew represented the love of a 15 year old that is never going to get a hug from her mom again. How do you get to the joy in that kind of storm? It is trust in God's love and his promises, in spite of the fact that sometimes we don't "get it" that gave me the strength to stand, tears streaming down my cheeks, and sing the first hymn on that funeral program "This is the Day that the Lord Has Made, Let us Rejoice and Be Glad in it". It was God who had me remembering the times I had been lead in singing that song by a vibrant, full of life, young woman who would now be singing with him in heaven.

It is trust in God's love and promises that gave me the strength to comfort my girls while they cried themselves to sleep after hearing of their grandma, my mom's, unexpected passing. It was the same faith that gave me a sense of peace, even through my shock and numbness, as I slumped down on my bedroom floor, when the girls were finally asleep and had an overwhelming sense of certainty that this was God's plan and it was okay. There is comfort and ultimately joy in the knowledge that he is in control.

When life gives us inexplicable pain it is easy to wonder where the joy is. The answer is put into words in Romans chapter

8 "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword.....No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." As declared in Job Chapter 22:26, who we know suffered hardship after hardship "Surely then you will find delight in the Almighty and will lift up your face to God."

Psalm 126:5 promises that "Those who sow in tears, will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him". As Max Lucado asks in his book; "Do your prayers seem unanswered? What you request and what you receive aren't matching up? Don't think God isn't listening. Indeed he is. He may have higher plans.....God will use whatever he wants to display his glory."

Where is the joy? It is in the Lord and in the promise he gives us in John Chapter 16. "I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

Until then I pray that God comforts you and those you love in a way that nothing else and no one else can. In that and in his promises, I pray that you find joy.