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The Goal of Christmas: Your Joy
1 John 1:1-4

One of the great favorites, that I'm sure you've sung already this year, though we did not sing it tonight, is Isaac Watts' meditation on Psalm 98, *Joy to the World*, sung to George Frederick Handel's famous tune, *Antioch*. Handel's glorious tune captures wonderfully the sense of celebration that characterizes Christmas for many of us, even if we would not consider ourselves to be Christians. We need only hear the first few bars and immediately all the images and sounds and smells of Christmas are evoked. In much the same way, Watts captures the connections between the ancient Psalm of praise and thanksgiving and the song of the angels sang over the shepherds one thousand years later, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men!" The coming of Jesus Christ is a cause for great joy. The psalmist gave us words to sing in expressing it. The angels could not contain their delight at the great events taking place in Bethlehem. Isaac Watts tasted that same joy and taught us to sing about it in his glorious carol. And Handel found notes to carry our emotions Godward in ways that perfectly fit the truths we are singing.

This evening I want to show you that, actually, joy is precisely the goal of that first Christmas. Jesus Christ was born for your joy.

Let me take you to one place in scripture that makes that clear. Turn with me please to 1 John 1:1-4.

And I want you to focus for a second on verse 4. In 1-3 John is talking about Jesus and His coming. And he says that that event is so momentous that he feels compelled to declare it to us—which is what his gospel is about, his three letters are about, and what the book of Revelation is about. They are all about Jesus who stepped onto the scene of human experience and history when He was born of the virgin in Bethlehem. That is what John is writing about. That is his great burden. He wants us to understand that fact and its life altering significance.

But in verse 4 he explains what the goal of his writing is. "And these things we write to you that your joy may be full." The events of the first Christmas compel him to write. The incarnation, the birth of Christ is the gun that fires the bullet of his preaching and writing. The target at which the gun aims as it propels the projectile of John's message towards us is joy. Your joy.

And John is not talking about the joy of escapism here, which is what Christmas can be for many of us, isn't it, a little oasis in the midst of the drudgery of 9-5? You are in the red, and you don't know how to pay. Your relationships are falling apart, and you know you are as much to blame as anyone, but you are clueless on how to change. Your job is on the line. Your body is falling apart. But Christmas comes along and allows us a few days of self deception. We pull on the mask. Forget about our worries for a while. Sing our songs. Give gifts we can't afford and worry about the bills later, and try as hard as we can to shut out the real world for a couple of days of so called Christmas cheer.

That's not what John is talking about at all. That kind of joy is a fleeting, false, and ultimately unsatisfying thing. When January rolls around and the bills come in, the tinsel and Christmas lights seem like an age away. So what *is* John talking about? What *is* the root and cause of the joy he has in mind?

I want you to look at three things in verses 1-4 with me very quickly. You will find them in the sermon outline in your bulletin, which might help you as you follow along with me.

First of all, John says that the joy that flows from the coming of Christ is **rooted in history**. Unlike the mythology that has grown up around our Christmases—Santa and Elves and Reindeer, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and all the rest, John's message is about history. The coming of Jesus Christ belongs in an entirely different category. We are dealing here with history, not mythology. Look at verse 1, please. John is writing about "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of Life."

Now I wish I had time to unpack some of the details here in more depth, but notice simply that John alludes to Genesis 1:1 here. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." What was from the beginning? It was God. And notice, too, how he connects the message of this letter with the message of his account of the life of Jesus in John's Gospel chapter 1:1. Speaking about Jesus, John said, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

So John is writing about the God who was in the beginning. And he is telling us that this God is to be identified with the Word of Life, which is a title for Jesus

Christ. And then he says something astonishing about Jesus Christ. He says that he heard Jesus, he saw Jesus with his eyes, he has looked upon Him and his hands have touched Him.

John is describing the time he spent with Jesus Christ. He listened to His teaching. He saw Him transfigured in glory on the mountain, watched as He healed others, as He was taken captive and tried and condemned and crucified; he had his feet washed by Him, leaned back against Him at the Last Supper in a pose of intimate friendship, and received fish from His hands and ate breakfast with Him three days after the tomb was found empty and the stone rolled away.

The Christian faith rests on an historical claim. It is not an abstract spirituality. It is not a moral code. It cannot be reduced to a series of metaphors. It claims that the God who made the universe was born as a man, of the Virgin Mary 2000 years ago. And John is writing to the churches that had sprung up as a result of the message about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection telling them just that. I am an eye witness. I was there. I saw Him, heard Him, touched Him.

The roots of the only lasting joy available to us lie in the historical fact of the virgin birth, the sinless life, the atoning death, and the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever you might like Christianity to be is irrelevant. However you like to think of Jesus is irrelevant. *These* are the facts. Christianity stands or falls with its historicity. It claims that Jesus really came, really was who He said He was, and really did what the gospels say He did. And if that is true, then nothing can be the same in the light of it.

It means that it was the God whose law we have all broken became one of us in Christ. It means that instead of attempting to work our way into God's good books, we can abandon ourselves to Christ who is God reaching down to us. It means that God Himself made payment for sinners. God bore the penalty for your selfishness and mine, for our pride and greed and lust and anger and spite, and the sinner's heart from which those specific sins all flow. It means that the cross is not just a moving historical example of loving human self sacrifice. It means that the Cross of Christ is the only grounds and basis of your salvation.

Christianity stands or falls with its historicity. If it is not true historically, it is not true at all. But if it is true *historically, everything changes*. You can't have a nice moral example in Jesus Christ. You must have a *Savior* who delivers you and

in so doing claims your all, or you must have a *judge* who will condemn you forever. *But a mere moral teacher, a guru, or philosopher, you cannot have. History does not leave that option open to you.*

Then secondly, John says the coming of Christ is not only historical but also scriptural. What I mean by that is that John was compelled by the facts about Jesus to speak and write, and his message has become part of our New Testament scriptures. Look with me at verse 2, “concerning the Word of Life—that life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you.”

John is an eyewitness of Christ’s deity united to humanity. He is an eye witness of His glory and His humility, of His power and His gentleness. He has seen healings. He heard His preaching and was taught personally by Him. He listened to Him pray. He saw the nails in His hands and feet and the grave clothes where His dead body laid. He walked and talked with the Resurrected Christ and watched Him ascend to glory. He has seen it, heard it, touched the gospel. John has lived the message. It is not surprising then that he simply cannot keep quiet about it.

He preaches it. He writes about it. He proclaims it. He declares it to us. The New Testament is simply that. It is the eye witness accounts of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is a compilation of the apostle’s explanation of the significance of the events they saw. It is the “what?” and the “so what?” recorded for us.

Now these two points mean that we cannot dismiss the claims of the Christian gospel, the claims of Jesus Christ lightly. Your preference for an individualized spirituality, your privatized portrait of Christ as a great moral teacher, whose morals—mysteriously enough—never seem to challenge our own, a philosopher who taught us all to love in some ill defined but awfully nice way, an enlightened human being who sets us all an example to follow—*whatever* you say about Him—if you have not wrestled first with these two claims, *you have no real basis for your belief.* It is grounded on nothing more than mere whim and taste and aesthetics. It is a faith of mere invention and nothing else. *No, the Bible demands that you investigate. Did Jesus really come into real, measurable, testable*

history? Can we really say that the Biblical accounts are reliable? Is He who He claimed to be?

You must face the historical claim, and you must face the biblical claim, and you must come to terms with them before you dismiss or reinvent Jesus to fit your lifestyle, because, if He *is* who He claims to be, then the implications are profound whether you accept Him or not.

And then let me invite you to look at verses 3 with me, last of all. Here are the implications. Here John connects the dots. Here is how the historical event and the scriptural proclamation can result in our real and lasting joy.

Verse 3: “that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

What will happen to you if you come to see that the only Jesus there is, is the one who was born of the virgin, was despised and rejected of men, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, who died and rose for sinners and their salvation? What will happen to you if you embrace by faith the reason for His coming—to take away your sin and cleanse your conscience and reconcile you to God?

John tells us here. You will have fellowship with other Christians and even with the Triune God Himself! The word “fellowship” is the Greek word *koinonia*. It means more than socializing. It means ***connection, communion, deep, interpenetrating, loving, family bonds***. The classic metaphor for *koinonia* is a body made of many parts but all integral to the whole. That is what we become to one another. That is what the church is supposed to be—that is what embracing the biblical gospel makes us—radical community. We live in an age seeking community. Facebook and Twitter offer an illusory version of it and even the illusion attracts the masses, desperate to belong. But by faith in Jesus Christ we finally can find true and ultimate connection. It is called the church.

But that connection is far more than horizontal, a thing experienced among ourselves in the church, as wonderful as that is. It involves communion, *koinonia*, fellowship, ***with God Himself***, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our fellowship, John says, is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Unlike any other religion, Christianity makes deeply historical claims. It says God *actually came down*. He became a man in Jesus Christ. He came to us that we might know Him personally, intimately, eternally; that by faith in Him we may be reconciled to Him. Friends, Christmas is about sinners being found by God when He came to us in that stable and lay in the manger. Trusting in Christ, our sins are forgiven, and we are swept up into an unending participation in fellowship with other believers and with God. Out of that glorious and mysterious reality flows joy upon joy.

That, John says in verse 4, is why I am writing to you. ***That*** is what the angels sang about. ***That*** is what Christmas is really about: The joy of knowing God through faith in Jesus Christ.

If you would like to know more about the Christian gospel or you'd like to explore the historicity of the gospel story and the reliability of the biblical accounts, I'd love to talk to you later. There are response cards in the pews and if you'd like to ask us questions or explore anything you've heard tonight further, then please fill one of those out and hand it to an usher before you leave, and we will follow up with you as quickly as we can.

And now will you pray with me?