

JOY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE
Fourth in an Advent Series on "JOY!" –Festival Sunday/ Fourth Sunday Advent
John 15: 7-12 December 18, 2016
The Church of the Covenant

There was joy all around the manger that first Christmas –the angels announced *“good news of a great joy which will come to all the people”* (Luke 2: 10). The angels promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth in anticipation of the birth, *“And you will have joy and gladness”* (Luke 1: 14) When the wise men saw the star over Bethlehem they *“rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”* (Matthew 2: 10). There was joy, joy and more joy all around the manger that first Christmas. May I suggest to you that this is always the place where joy may be found? There in the birth of the baby Jesus you will find it, where it has always been found, you will discover it again...It is the promise of Christmas...

I love cookies. I love Christmas cookies. I love all manner of cookies. They are my principle weakness in life. And also a source of considerable joy. Did you know that the institution of the “cookie table” at weddings seems to be a particularly Western Pennsylvania tradition? I was shocked to discover when I served churches in Iowa and Michigan and Virginia that there were never cookie tables at weddings. I love cookie tables. As you come in to the reception you eye the cookie table, looking for favorites. You try to not be TOO obvious but at some point during the reception you run over and begin assessing which cookies you will eat. Then at some discrete point in time you casually amble over to the table and begin grazing. The plates are never quite large enough but you try to take one of each type and variety of cookie, just to fairly sample them all, of course. Never met a cookie I didn't like. But of course, they don't all fit on the small plate so you have to go back a second time. And then you have to decide which of these delectable delicacies you prefer, so you go back a third time to place your five favorite cookies on your plate, you know, just to be sure you pick the right cookie as your favorite. Ah, but then you have narrowed it down to your top two cookies so you go back again, placing at least two of your favorites on your plate to make sure you have an accurate sample set. I loved the one reception where the family noted that each person in attendance at the reception would have to eat no less than 49 cookies in order for them to be all consumed. Praise God, it is my version of paradise! Heaven dusted with powdered sugar! And of course there is the spiritual and worshipfully liturgical moment when they note that there are containers to take some extra cookies home with you, you know, “for the road”. I remember praying when I was serving a church outside our area –“O Lord, please bring me back to God's country, where the cookies are great, and cookie tables laden with abundance, and my stomach and my joy full indeed”. “Thank you, Lord, for bringing me back to God's country, a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey and cookie tables. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

God's joy at Christmas is a lot like the cookie table. You know, at some point in the process you are so full that you could not possibly place even one more cookie inside yourself. You are so full of cookies that if you eat even one more you would burst explosively. One cookie over the line, sweet Jesus; one cookie over the line. But that's the way spiritual joy works in our lives. That's the way Jesus' joy works in our soul and in our heart. The joy comes. There is a spiritual breakthrough. The Holy Spirit brings it and in abundance. It pushes everything else out of our heart and mind and soul. There is no room for anything else other than God's joy. Sadness is pushed out. Worry is pushed out. No room for fear or anxiety. No room for depression. Arise, shine your light has come! There is room in the manger of your heart for Jesus, but for nothing else. The birth of the baby Jesus pushes everything else out of the manger of your heart. “Bread of heaven, bread of heaven”, goes the old hymn, “feed me till I want no more”. No more room for even one more cookie. No more room for anything other than Jesus. That's

what happens, spiritually speaking, to the human heart when the JOY of the birth of Jesus is born and reborn into our souls this Christmas. Do you want that kind of joy this Christmas?

Our scripture is a promise from Jesus. He is speaking to His disciples about his impending death. Of course, they are worried, concerned and fearful. Their Master and friend and the person in whom they have seen God is going away. But He is about to give them the secret to having JOY in the face of such internal struggle. This promise comes from the Gospel of John. Jesus says that *"If you abide in me. And my words abide in you..."* (John 15: 7) We are to abide in Christ and Christ is to abide in us. We are to live in Christ and then Christ will live in us. The presence of the Lord Jesus Christ is born in us; the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ is re-born in us. And out of that spiritual reality, out of the merging of flesh and the Holy Spirit, out of the Holy Spirit coming and indwelling our spirit, out of Christ abiding in our heart comes the promise. And the promise is this. The Lord promises us –*"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."* (John 15: 11) He has spoken this living Word to us, that He Himself might abide and be within us. And then when Jesus shows up, when Christ is reborn into the human heart, when birth and new spiritual birth happens, when there is this sort of spiritual breakthrough in our lives, then when JESUS SHOWS UP, THEN JOY SHOWS UP. When Jesus is within us then He promises that His *"joy may be in you"*. With Jesus comes Joy. And then His promise continues. He promises not just that His joy will be within us, but that *"your joy may be full"*. (v. 11) The fullness of God, the Holy Spirit comes, and brings Jesus, and has Him reborn into our hearts, and in the bringing of Jesus alive within us, the Word become flesh in our flesh, then our joy is the full joy of the Lord. We become filled with joy and it pushes fear and sadness and loss and stress and anxiety and plain out of our heart. Just like being filled with cookies from the cookie table makes there no more room for anything else. Jesus comes this Christmas. And His joy pushes everything else out of our heart until our heart can hold nothing other than His joy. Bread of heaven. Feed me till I want no more. Fill me with inexpressible joy. Lord, come to me this Christmas and push everything out of my heart other than the living presence of Jesus who gives me JOY!!!!!!!!!!

Dr. James Loder, my favorite seminary professor who wrote the book "The Transforming Moment", tells a story of him making faces at a baby in a grocery store line. I have tucked that story away in my heart and this year it happened to me again. I am standing in the checkout line at Giant Eagle and everyone in Washington County has decided this is the moment to stock up in advance of Christmas. Long, annoying line, filled with grumpy, stressed out people. I remember Loder's story and I remember mugging at a little baby myself many years before. And there before me is the cutest little baby you ever saw. Held by her stressed out Mother and I could have missed it. You know, kept my nose in my cell phone, returning church Emails. So I smiled at the little baby and she smiled back at me. So I made a face at the little baby and she giggled with delight in return. So pretty soon I am in full peek-a-boo mode. () Then I move into "Crabby Appleton" versus "Happy Appleton" mode. (There are a lot of people around at Christmas in Crabby Appleton mode!) Child is fascinated and laughing with glee. Pretty soon I note that a lot of other people are staring at Dr. Broberg making a fool of himself in the check out line. But I don't care. I am having way too much fun. And soon others are also laughing and smiling at the spectacle at Giant Eagle. And suddenly I stop to realize that all my troubles, worries, cares, sadnesses and losses have been cast out...because something, dare I say it, SOMEONE, has come and has brought joy to me this year. **How like God to send JOY to the World through a little baby! If you abide in me, promises Jesus, and abide in my words, then ask and it shall be done for you.** This CHRISTMAS, my beloved, ask for JOY! Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*