

Text: [Isaiah 9:1-7 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: December 28, 2025 – First Sunday after Christmas
Title: “Making Room for Joy” – Sanctuary Advent Series
Theme: Joy cannot be achieved by controlling our circumstances.

1

Joy, among all the emotions
Seems to me the most fragile

I mean, it's very powerful in the moment
When it's shared, other people can even get swept up in it
I remember being an exchange student in 1990 when West
Germany won the World Cup – so much joy! (and beer!)

But joy is also fleeting
When the moment passes, we often feel flat
Maybe even with a sense of “did that really happen?”
Words to describe what we felt fail us

Sometimes we are afraid to get too excited about much of
anything, because we don't want to be disappointed
Fear can talk us out of joy

Joy is also fragile because it can be taken away
I can't think of another emotion someone can “steal” from us
But people can definitely “steal” our joy
Sometimes, simply by refusing to participate in it
Or with a single negative comment

Joy sometimes succumbs to the overall feeling in the room
When everyone else is down, it's tough to be the only happy
person
When no one else is really in the mood for a joke

2

Joy may seem fleeting and fragile
But it's also one of the most pervasive ideas in scripture

Mentioned hundreds and hundreds of times
As a condition, as a promise, and as a command

"Rejoice always!" Paul says (1 Thessalonians 5:16)
Which is great
Except when we consider on how fragile joy is
And then it feels like a burden
A source of guilt anytime we're just not feeling it

But I have a feeling that God wouldn't be out here commanding
joy
And reminding us of all the many reasons for it
Unless God already understood precisely how fragile it is
We don't need to be constantly reminded of something unless it's
really easy to forget

There is a great poem by Mary Oliver, one that Kate and I had
read at our wedding, called: ["Don't Hesitate"](#)
And there's a line in it that's a great reminder of this truth – one
that I often return to in my mind
She says: "Joy is not made to be a crumb."¹

In other words, it's not meant to be rare or scarce or something
we have to protect or preserve
It's meant to be experienced fully and freely and often
Even if we have to be reminded of that every day
Every time we pick up the Bible

3A

This is one of those passages of scripture

That a preacher is tempted to just leave alone
In my archive I found only one sermon on it – one sermon in over
20 years
Because the language and the images speak for themselves

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light
On those living in a pitch dark land, light had dawned.”

“You have made the nation great;
You have increased its joy.”

“As on the day of Midian, you’ve shattered the yoke that burdened
them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their
oppressor.
Because every boot of the thundering warriors, and every
garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire.”

The promise is of an end to war
The inbreaking of a day of peace

And here, joy is expressed in terms we understand & can relate to
Joy is the *removal* of something:
Release from oppression, the shattering of the yoke

Isn’t that like what we always say?
“I’ll feel better once I get out from under x”
“I’ll be able to relax once y is over”
Our conventional way of thinking about joy is that it will happen
Once the conditions *preventing* joy are removed

I wonder, though, whether that’s a wise strategy
And whether it gives our circumstances way too much power
That approach may leave us forever waiting on joy
Rather than making room for it in the midst of whatever is
happening around us

Because, after all, once one thing gets resolved – you know how
life is!
Won't another just take its place?

3B

But keep reading in Isaiah:
“A child has been born to us
A son given to us
And authority will be on his shoulders.
He will be named
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Eternal Father,
Prince of Peace.”

Early Christians looked to this passage of scripture as they
reflected upon Jesus' Nativity
Because its promises transcend circumstances and point to
lasting joy

“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of
Peace”

In Jesus' time, many of these same titles had also been applied to
Caesar Augustus – Rome's first emperor
In this child born in Bethlehem, followers of Jesus saw what the
Empire claimed to be able to offer – but could not
Early Christians saw a contrast between conventional ways
humans attempt to secure joy for ourselves
And how God thinks and talks about joy in the scriptures

Augustus promised peace, prosperity and joy by the elimination of
threats
A military solution based on the might of Roman legions

The other promised joy rooted in a faith in something much
stronger and more enduring

Rome thought the solution to everything was an army
Heaven thought the solution to everything was a baby

4

We are not Augustus
But it is still our temptation
To build our own versions of empires

We think that if only we had the POWER to make certain things
go our way, we could secure our joy
We might not use armies to do it
Instead we deploy achievement and money and success and
power

But this is joy at its absolutely most fragile
Because this approach makes joy even MORE dependent on
circumstances, not less

True joy isn't found in what we can possess
Or in the absence of threats, danger, or difficulty
It's not found when we "get past this thing," whatever this thing is
Though we're always tempted to believe it is

5

"Joy is not made to be a crumb"
We can approach joy as though it is something to be fought for
and defended
Something fragile that always needs protecting and securing

But that will lead us down a road toward a need to control
everything
At this time of year, that comes out in the desire for a picture-
perfect Christmas and all the things that entails

The danger of pinning our hopes for joy on the right
circumstances
Is that we spend all our time chasing circumstances
Rather than experiencing the joy that's already present among us
In awe, in beauty, and in connection
Sources of joy that are so much less fragile
Because they're so much more readily accessible

The Christmas story was short on ideal circumstances
An unwed Mom, a baby born in a stable, no family around to help

But it was long on awe and beauty and connection
Lights in the sky, angel choirs
Visitors who come seeking this baby in faith
Prophetic words spoken to the parents about the child's future

It seems to me that when it comes to joy
We have a choice to make:
Whether to *pursue* joy
To seek joy on *our* terms
By making sure our circumstances are right
And eliminating anything that might threaten it

This is the common approach we take
Just know that this kind of joy will always require a high degree of
control
It will always feel fragile
Will always feel like a crumb to be fought over
Because it will be so rare

The other alternative is to allow the joy that God promised
To break in
To embrace awe and beauty and connection wherever we find
them

When we begin to think of joy in this way
As something that can be found everywhere
Regardless of circumstances
We will no longer experience joy as a crumb

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¹ This poem can be found in her collections entitled *Swan* (2010) or *Devotions* (2017).