

## The Desert Shall Rejoice©

Isaiah 35:1-2a, 8-10; Psalm 126; Isaiah 61:1-11

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JOY

Dr. Sharlyn Gates

Do you realize there are only seven more days, after today, before Christmas? The days are flying by, aren't they? As they always do.

Here we are in the third week of Advent and our focus today is on joy. Rejoicing is the theme.

Our new Creative Spirits Ministry team is doing an amazing job with worship visuals for us, aren't they? As we look around the sanctuary, we have a sense of coming from a barren desert to a place that is beginning to show many signs of change. There are blossoms showing everywhere. Transformation is happening before our eyes. I'm hoping you are sensing that same feeling within your hearts.

Before we go very far with the sermon today, and because our theme today is joy, I want to share with you this video I found on Facebook. It is pure joy to me and I hope you will see it that way too. It is the Christmas story being told by the children from Southland Christian Church in Nicholasville, KY. The children tell the story, but the adults act it out.

So, it a little twist on a Christmas pageant. It is humorous and it makes me laugh with pure joy when I watch it. It's three minutes long. I think you will find it worth the time. Let's watch.

### VIDEO

["Christmas According to Kids  
Southland Christian Church"](#)

I love the angel singing "glorious" instead of "Gloria" and that the wise men brought diapers, wipes, a stuffed animal – a hippo – and shoes. And gold, Frankenstein and Myrrh.

Someone said, "He's going to be our best friend."

And Joseph says, "I love you and ... you're the best baby I ever seen."

And Mary says "This baby is going to change the world."

A joyful, humorous way of telling the great, joyful Christmas message. "This baby is going to be our best friend. This baby is going to change the world."

As I've been putting up Christmas decorations and listening to Christmas music I've felt that joy rising up within my own heart. I admit this past year has been a little less joyful

with the passing of my dad and then Fred breaking his hip. Those life and death events can push the joy down a little – or sometimes a lot – to where we might think we’ve lost it completely. I wasn’t at that point, ever.

And I know that many of you have had losses recently – a mother, grandmother, friends, spouse. The teacher writes in Ecclesiastes 3 that there is a season for all things – a time to be born and a time to die; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.

The apostle Paul emphasizes how important rejoicing is. In Philippians 4:4 he says “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice.”

We talked about that rejoicing always just recently. Once again, I find it can be puzzling – that we are to rejoice always. I define always as – well – always. No break.

Siri, the wise man who lives in my smartphone, defines always as being “at all times; on all occasions. For all future time; forever.”

He also says it can mean “repeatedly and annoyingly.” I can see how always could be annoying – depending on the situation. In some cases always could be defined as “this is never going to end!!!”

My point is that always is constant and to rejoice always means we would be rejoicing even in those times of fear and sorrow and grief; in sickness and uncertainty. We would be rejoicing if we lived in California and we had minutes to grab a few belongings and get out of the way of wildfires – fires that come and destroy everything we own.

Now that just seems ridiculous, doesn’t it? Are we humans not supposed to feel the emotions God gave us? Are we not to mourn in the season of mourning and dance in the season of dancing? Are we not to show our heartache over loss? And tell me, please, Paul, how we can control those emotions in times of deep despair!

But the key here is that we are not being told to rejoice over the thing that is hurting us; the thing that has tried to squelch our spirits, to rob us of hope and peace.

The rejoicing is in the Lord – the Lord who is with us in those heartaches; the Lord who has compassion for his people; the Lord who, as Isaiah says, brings good news to the oppressed and binds up the broken-hearted; who comforts all who mourn and who gives a garland of joy in place of the ashes of grief.

Kay Warren, co-founder with her husband, Rick Warren, of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California writes about how joy is something different from happiness. She is the author of the book: Choose Joy Because Happiness Isn’t Enough.

She writes these thoughtful words:

“Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.

You’ll find nothing in that definition about happy feelings, because, as we all know, happiness is fleeting and temporary.

We tend to think that life comes in hills and valleys. In reality, it’s much more like train tracks. Every day of your life, wonderful, good things happen that bring pleasure and contentment and beauty to you. At the exact same time, painful things happen to you or those you love that disappoint you, hurt you, and fill you with sorrow. These two tracks — both joy and sorrow — run parallel to each other every single moment of your life.

That’s why, when you’re in the midst of an amazing experience, you have a nagging realization that it’s not perfect. And while you’re experiencing something painful, there’s the glorious realization that there is still beauty and loveliness to be found. They’re inseparable.

If you look down train tracks into the brightness of the horizon, the tracks become one. You can’t distinguish them as two separate tracks. That’s how it will be for us, too. One day, our parallel tracks of joy and sorrow will merge into one. The day we meet Jesus Christ in person and see the brightness of who he is, it will all come together for us. Then it will all make complete sense.”

The thing is, even when we are in the season of a dry, barren desert within our spirits, the Lord is there also, transforming, healing, renewing.

“Then our mouth was filled with laughter,” writes the psalmist, “and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them... The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced... May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.”

As the Christmas pageant we watched on the video proclaimed – “This baby will be our best friend. This is the best baby I ever seen.

This baby will change the world.

Even the desert will rejoice. Even you – regardless of what season or what train track you’re on, it’s okay to let yourself feel the sorrow and the dryness if that is your season, but also allow yourself to realize the deep joy you have in the baby, whose birth we celebrate – the baby who is your best friend; your Savior.

His name shall be called Immanuel. Which means God is with us. And that good news is cause for rejoicing in all things. He has changed the world. He is changing the world. He will continue to change the world. Joy. Joy. Great joy to the world.

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