

[PRAYER] [BLANK] It has been quite a week, my friends in Christ. I am so very grateful for everyone who helped with Jeanne King’s memorial service. We gave our friend who gave us so much joy a great remembrance. [MUSEUM] And then, yesterday, we had a wonderful field trip to the Yale Art Museum, where members from both of the churches who I serve had a chance to look at the oldest Christian artwork in the world. These ancient paintings, preserved with modern technology, helped us to step into the lives of Christians from eighteen hundred years ago.

[JESUS] The key picture that was preserved from this early church was painted above the pool that was used to baptise new believers into the Christian faith. As new Christians came up from the waters, they laid their eyes on Jesus, the good shepherd, carrying a lost sheep. Notice that Jesus is not carrying a lamb - that’s a hefty sheep he’s toting! Most new believers back then would have been adults, who had completed a thorough education and training about this brand-new faith. It must have been a great joy for them to see the face of Jesus there. [BLANK]

I know that some of you may not be in the mood today for a message about rejoicing in God. That’s not the point. Faith is not about what we’re in the mood for, Amen? Faith is about what we are willing to do with God, for God, and in God, no matter what our mood. We can forget that easily in modern churches. We surround ourselves with beautiful things, we put comfy cushions on our pews, and we want our music and our worship leaders to coax us into the mood for rejoicing in our God in this fine living room of faith. Mind you, a little air conditioning might help, but that’s another story, isn’t it?

When you travel back 1,800 years to that ancient house church, in a forgotten town, on the edge of nowhere, that’s not what faith was about. Faith was about salvation in a world that was falling apart in the middle of global brutality. Faith was not about everyday aches and pains, and disappointments, but the challenges of short and hard lives, in a world that had no such thing as medicine to help us forget that we are mortal beings. Roman Gods had lost their meaning. The God of Israel seemed to be defeated after the destruction of Jerusalem, thirty years after Jesus died and rose from the dead. New mystical cults promised hidden knowledge and power to a few elite people. But for people like you and me, salvation was not easy to find.

And yet, down a back alley, through a door that looked like any other door, people would walk into a simple home that had become a church, an assembly of people who wanted the salvation of Jesus Christ. They needed a guide, a shepherd, who would promise them a safe and sure path through life’s challenges. The world had lost any meaningful story for life, beyond a full belly, a bit of pride, and a few coins in a leather purse. What did it all add up to? Was it really just about me, against the world?

[PRAISE] “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is in me!” The words of Psalm 103 were surely sung in that very place eighteen hundred years ago. People wanted a sure reason to rejoice. People wanted a certain God to give praise to, in the middle of a world of false gods, false pride, and false security. They wanted to be able to let down their game face, their outer shell of being just fine, in the middle of everything that was not fine at all,

and to admit how much they missed having something to shout about, not because they wanted a mood, but because their hearts were as good as dead if they couldn't.

[DEFINE] “Rejoice!” It's not a word that we use much these days, is it? Let's try some of the words that it is like: “rapture,” “delirium,” “triumph,” “elation,” “jubilation.” Red Sox fans, think Edgar Renteria hitting a squibber to Keith Foulke, who threw it to first baseman Doug Mientkiewicz, sealing their 2004 World Series victory. Yankees fans, think of a drifting pop fly settling in the glove of third baseman Charlie Hayes to end the 1996 World Series. Elation. Delirium. Rapture. Jubilation. Now, think as if those games were played for your very life, your very soul, for everything that ever mattered, and would matter. That's Christian rejoicing. [BLANK]

We are set free by God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to invite that kind of joy into our life. It is joy that is precious beyond the most long-awaited and heard-earned World Series ring, beyond the best job, the best photo- perfect moments, beyond the greatest awards and praise that we could experience through our own efforts. And like those precious World Series moments, they come through a dedication to discipline, discipline that we call Christian discipleship. As we've explored this summer, it takes commitment, focus, trust, letting God be the boss, obeying God's ways, and enduring through hard times and tough challenges that seem like they'll never end. No one forces us to do these things. We're free to do them, or not, just like every year there are plenty of teams who are free to do their best, or not, to gain prizes and glory.

How much more precious, how much more glorious, is the rejoicing that God will bless us with when we make God's joy the greatest priority of our lives! The God of heaven and earth pours out on us every single day an ocean of power, might, resources, and everlasting love, blessings to encourage us to choose God's joy as the organizing principle of our lives, as God does every day. The God of our salvation, Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Son of all humanity, blesses us every day with his everlasting presence, our risen Lord and Savior, never giving up on us, always willing to pick us up on his shoulders, to get us back to his people known as “church.” The God who is ready not just to sustain us but to transform us, in God's living Holy Spirit, blesses us with a sense of connectedness to God's eternal blessings, with the blessings of God's creation, with the blessings of God's people trying to be disciples in Jesus, and with the blessings of God's people who need Jesus. This God, this only real and living God, wants us to be rejoicing for God's blessings with every part of our being, from beyond the depths of the bottom of our hearts; and God asks us not to be in the mood for it, or to put out pretty things for it, or to beg for it, or to be made worthy of it. No, God asks us to be prepared for God's blessings, any day, any time, every time, every day, forever, because God will never give up blessing us with the freedom to choose the joy of God's blessings!

Rejoice! Two thousand years after Jesus, eighteen hundred years after that house church baptised new believers in Jesus Christ, God is not done with people telling the story of the only real blessings worth rejoicing about on God's good earth. We get sold a thousand different things, a thousand different ways, every single day, that we are told will

be just as good as rejoicing in God’s blessings. They all fade away. They all get old. They all look good for a while, and then, they move on, leaving us behind. We can play make-believe, and make our lives a rerun of these fading moments, and pretend that we can do a better job than God in creating joy. And when we do, we will be liars, every single time. Many things are worthy of giving us joy. But only the blessings of God are real joy.

Now, more than ever, we need to be a church that will be a fountain of rejoicing in the God of our blessings. Now, more than ever, we need to be a church that embraces the discipleship required to be authentic servants of God’s blessings, who will bring God’s joy into the world. Now, more than ever, we have to be more than just in the mood for church, more than just waiting for people to play church by our rules, more than just making our church a reflection of our own desires to get the joy that we want. In Luke’s gospel today, Jesus had a word for such people, and it wasn’t a nice word. Jesus called religious leaders who wanted a church made in their own image hypocrites. Wow. God said that to God’s church. That happened.

We don’t want that to happen here. Day by day, together, and in our own lives, God challenges us to rejoice in the awesome blessings that God has given us in our freedom to be like God, in God, with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. Be grateful in your heart for the many blessings that our God who loves you so very much has blessed you with. Rejoice in being God’s church on earth, morsels of Christ, seeds of faith planted to bring God’s coming rejoicing to earth, for you, and for everyone. And bless this God, with all your soul, and all that is in you. Rejoice in our God, and find God’s joy. Amen.