

Surprised by Joy

[Luke 1:26-56]

ADVENT series:

Living in Hope }

Waiting in Faith }

Bowed down in Worship }

→ Surprised by Joy }

Following the Advent Devotional from the writings of

Henri Nouwen

C. S. Lewis entitled his autobiography "Surprised by Joy"...and what he meant by "Joy" in this context, was "a glimpse of the eternal".

In his book he emphasized the difference between "Joy" and "Happiness and pleasure". Pleasure is often in our power – but joy never is.

C. S. Lewis described this joy as: the experience of "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction"...and "this desire is ultimately the desire for God in response to God's calling."

- Joy is the gift of God.
- Joy is the fruit of the Spirit of God.
- Joy comes from the touch of God and is felt in the movement of God.
- "The *joy of the LORD* is my strength" writes Nehemiah.

His book "Surprised by Joy" tells the story of his becoming a Christian...

The death of his mother when he was aged 7 shattered his settled childhood – and his spiritual quest was for a return of the joy he had experienced as a child [he describes "3 spots of time" in his book]. It was a quest that led him from Atheism to believe in the existence of God [over the duration of a bus ride in 1929!]; finally, in 1931, after a long evening discussing religious belief and mythology with J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of "Lord of the Rings", he wrestled with the concept of Christ as a divine being and by the next morning, had become a Christian.

Henri Nouwen writes "**Don't be surprised by pain – be surprised by joy!**"

And we encounter this as a repeated theme as we read the familiar Christmas story:

First there's Zechariah and Elizabeth. So entrenched, I suggest, was the feeling of shame of having no heir and of feeling in the disfavour of God, that Zechariah cannot believe the message of the angel that Elizabeth his wife will become pregnant and bear a Son [Lk. 1:20]. Elizabeth felt keenly her "disgrace among the people" [Lk. 1:25].

"Don't be surprised by pain"...

- Living with the assumption that her barrenness was somehow a judgment from God;
- Living through the years of prayers that hadn't been answered in the way that she hoped;

- Living with the acute personal sadness felt during the happiness of other children's births
- Living with the increasing difficulty to feel your place in the extended family when the children you have to do with are always someone else's;
- Living with the consequent negative self image that all this gave rise to.

"Be surprised by joy"!

- The birth that negated all the lies that she had struggled not to believe
- The birth that took her disgrace away [1:25]
- They had a Son who, true to the angel's word, became a joy and a delight and in whose birth many rejoiced [1:14]
- The Lord had demonstrated his favour towards them

Then there were the shepherds *"living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night."*

There was not a caste system in Israel at the time, but there was definitely a class system, and the shepherds were right down there, at the bottom.

"Don't be surprised by pain"...

- the abuse and the prejudice
- the rights everyone else had but which didn't apply to you
- the way the courts wouldn't believe your word, just because you were a shepherd
- the taunting and the teasing, the unfair reputation that you carried

"Be surprised by joy"!

- Of all the people in Bethlehem, the angels appeared to *them!*
- The angels brought "Good news of great joy!" – to *them!*
- The whole of the Bethlehem hillside lit up by a great company of the heavenly host – appearing to *them!*
- After finding the child – just as they had been told - when the townspeople heard their report, they listened to *them!*
- The shepherds glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told to *them!*

Then there were the visitors from the East. Last week I read the end of the poem by T. S. Elliot, here's the first part of "The Journey of the Magi":

*"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter."
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,*

*Lying down in the melted snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on the slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

“Don’t be surprised by pain”...

- from journeys that take longer than you expect
- from cross cultural experiences that quickly lose their appeal
- from unfamiliar temperatures and unexpected problems
- from missing family, home comforts, familiarity
- from constantly being overcharged and made to feel like outsiders
- from wondering whether what you were doing was all a waste of time

“Be surprised by joy”!

- when they were led to just the right place, they were overjoyed
- when they found the child Jesus with his mother Mary, they were overjoyed
- when they bowed down in worship, presenting their gifts, with a sense of “Mission accomplished” they were satisfied
- when they received that warning in a dream to return back by another route, and they had it confirmed that they had been caught up in a God-happening so much bigger than themselves, they knew joy.

And central in the whole story was Mary

The implications of the angel’s message of her miraculous conception were potentially life threatening. During Jesus ministry, the religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery to be stoned. Even today, pregnant girls who have been raped are stoned to death as adulterers (because they can’t produce witnesses that they were raped) – seen on websites from Somalia, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The submissive response of Mary “to be the handmaid of the Lord shows an extraordinary degree of faith and trust.

When the old man Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms at 8 days old and prayed, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all people...”, he then turned to Mary and spoke of the pain she would experience: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken

against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. *And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*"

"Don't be surprised by pain"...

- in the years of holding on to God's promises when life isn't working out as you had expected
- in being sidelined – finding your place in your son's life being taken by other "mothers"
- in living with apprehension for your son in the light of opposition, riots, death threats
- in watching your son die as a common criminal

"Be surprised by joy"!

- when on that Sunday morning you heard the first report of the empty tomb
- when you first see the son you bore as the resurrected Lord of Glory
- when the light of Jesus' resurrection sheds light on all those things that in Jesus' life had been a mystery

"Don't be surprised by pain..."

Jesus said, "Now is your time of grief..."

"Be surprised by joy"!

"But I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy." [John 16:22]

"Don't be surprised by pain..."

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble..."

"Be surprised by joy"!

"But take heart," he added, "I have overcome the world."

"Don't be surprised by pain – be surprised by joy"! Because, as Bonhoeffer says:

The joy of God has been through the poverty of the crib and the distress of the cross; therefore it is insuperable, irrefutable

- *the joy of God does not deny the distress where it is, but finds God in the midst of it, indeed precisely there;*
- *it does not contest the most grievous sin, but finds forgiveness there;*
- *it looks death in the face; yet finds life in death itself.*

Living in Hope + Waiting in Faith + Bowing down in Worship → Surprised by Joy

YES! A sermon with just one message!

"Don't be surprised by pain – be surprised by joy"!